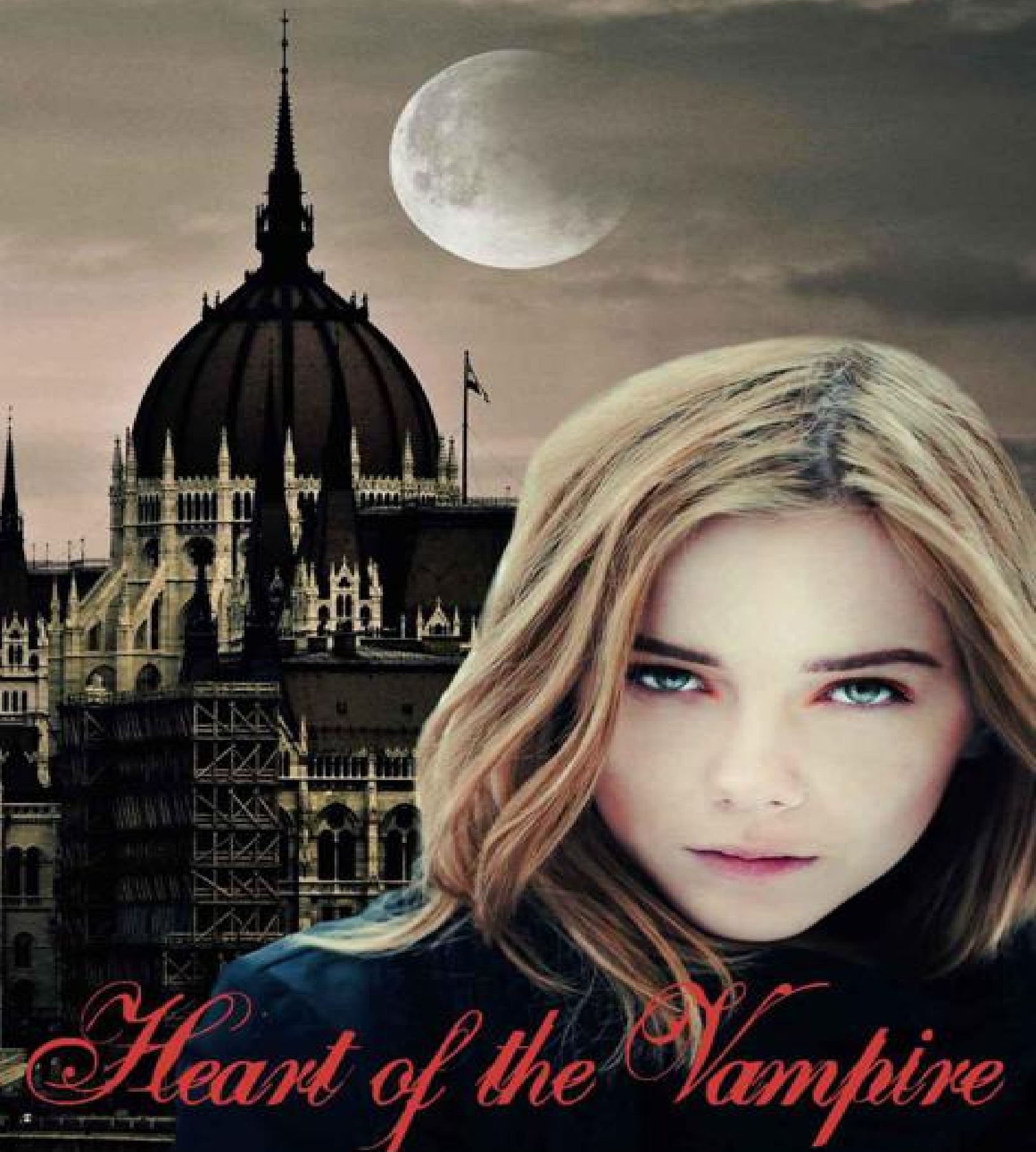


GAYLA TWIST



The Vanderlind Castle Series: Book 2

Heart of the Vampire

Gayla Twist

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DEDICATION

As always, to my darling Q

Chapter 1

“Aurora, I think I’m falling in love with you,” he whispered, his lips brushing against the flesh of my throat.

I froze, then silently cursed myself for it because he’d obviously noticed. “Um...” I managed, trying desperately to think of a response that didn’t make me come off as a complete jerk. “That’s really sweet of you to say.”

Fred pulled away from where he’d been kissing my neck. “Sweet? That’s not exactly what I was hoping to hear.” It was dark out, and Fred had parked on a quiet street a few blocks away from my house. We were in the backseat of his car, a Toyota Camry, so there wasn’t a lot of room for him to create distance between us. But he did his best.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

I didn’t know what my problem was with Fred. He was tall and good looking. Plus he had blond hair and brown eyes, which is a pretty rare combination. He was popular at our school—one of the stars of Tiburon High’s football team. As his girlfriend, I probably should have known what position he played, but I just couldn’t seem to keep it in my head. I finally figured out that no one ever bothered to ask me much about football, so I gave up trying.

If I was being honest, I wasn’t even sure why Fred was dating me, much less professing that he was falling in love.

He'd asked me out a little over a month earlier. I should have just said, "No," but instead I'd said, "I'll think about it."

My best friend, Blossom, kept hounding me, insisting, "You're an idiot if you say no to Fred Lighton. He's one of the most popular boys in this school."

A few days later, I finally said to Fred, "Sure, I guess," when he asked me out again. But I didn't say yes because I liked Fred or because he was popular or anything like that. I said it because I needed something, anything, to distract me from my broken heart.

At the time, I was already studying my brains out at school plus taking on extra credit and working extra shifts at Cup of Joe's, the cafe where I had a part-time job. It still wasn't enough. I needed more chatter in my life to fight off the misery. Dating a hunky football player sounded like as good of a plan as any.

Contrary to what I expected from a guy on the football team, Fred was pretty nice on our first date. We went to the movies, and I tried not to immediately pull away when the lights went low and he put his arm around me. It was just so hard to keep from remembering how even the slightest touch from another boy had made me tremble. But that boy and I couldn't be together. I had to keep reminding myself of that. It was better, safer, for me to be with someone like Fred. Even if his kisses did very little for me besides chap my lips.

On our third date, Fred was unusually keyed up. He kept bouncing his right leg under the table and grinning at me in a way that I couldn't decipher. Finally, I just asked him, "What's up with you? Why are you so excited?"

"It's our third date," he said, waggling his eyebrows at me.

"Um, yeah?"

"Well, you know..." His face reddened.

I was mystified. "No, I don't know."

"You know," he said again, clearing his throat. "The third date rule."

"The what?" I knew perfectly well what he was talking about, but I was incredulous that he had brought it up.

"The third date rule," he said more quietly. We were in public, and he was growing quite embarrassed.

"What's that?"

"It's a rule, you know, when you're dating someone," he hedged, not wanting to come straight out with it. I said nothing, just gave him an expectant stare, so he continued with, "You know, when it's the third date that means you get to, you know..."

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders, wondering if he was actually going to explain his expectations.

Fred sighed and said, "It's a rule that when you're dating someone, on the third date, the two of you, you know." He couldn't meet my eye but kept going. "You get together."

"You mean sex?" I said in a slightly elevated voice. We were sitting in a booth at Darlene's Diner. My question made a few of the patrons glance in our direction.

"Yes," Fred said in a quiet, clenched voice, giving me a significant look. He obviously didn't want anyone to overhear our conversation.

"Are you kidding?" I couldn't help but laugh. "You mean, we've gone to the movies, we've studied together after school once, and now we're at this diner so you think that means we know each other well enough that we're going to have sex?"

It was Fred's turn to shrug. "Yeah, I mean, why not? It's the rule."

"Whose rule?" I wanted to know.

"I don't know. It's just the rule," he told me, shrinking down in the booth a little and glancing around the room to see if anyone was listening.

I couldn't believe guys. Three dates in and I was expected to hand over my virginity just because somewhere at some time in the past fifty years some stupid guy probably made a joke about it. The joke somehow spread along the guy grapevine, and suddenly they all acted like it was relationship law. As long as it suited their desires, of course. I was positive that if there was a joke about no sex until after thirty dates, guys would have said it was a bunch of made-up crap.

"It's not my rule," I told him.

He seemed a little perplexed by that. "I think it's everybody's rule," he said.

I shook my head. "Not for kids in high school."

Then he went into guy mode, which I'd been expecting since he brought the whole thing up. His head got all loose on his neck and started bobbing around, which was something guys did when they were being defensive about manhood issues although I wasn't sure why. "Listen," he said, leaning back. "I'm on the football team. There are plenty of girls in school that would be happy to date me."

"Okay," I said simply.

His eyes grew wide for a moment, thinking that I'd just agreed to sex, but then they narrowed as he had a bit longer to assess my response. "Okay, what?"

"Okay, you should go date one of them," I said. "We're not engaged or anything. I mean, we're barely even dating. If your focus is on getting laid and you think there's a girl out there that's willing to accommodate you, then I think you should ask her out." My mom was a therapist specializing in girls who had been through trauma. Since I was old enough to talk, she'd raised me not to tolerate any nonsense from boys.

Fred just sat there staring at me, confounded. Finally, he said, "You mean, like, not date anymore?"

"Exactly." I reached into my bag and pulled out three dollars. I'd only ordered an iced tea, so I figured the money

would cover my bill plus tip. "No hard feelings, though," I told him as I scooted out of the booth. "I hope we can still be friends."

Fred had driven, but I was within walking distance of Blossom's house, and I was pretty sure she was home. There was also always the fallback option of Mervin, Tiburon's lone taxi driver. He was super cranky and took forever, but he was on call 24/7 as long as your trip didn't go too far outside of town.

"Hey," Blossom said, frowning at me when she opened the front door after I rang the bell. "What are you doing here? I thought you had a date with Fred."

"I did," I told her as I walked into the Costers' house. "But Fred and I decided it was better if we're just friends."

"Seriously? What the hell happened?" Blossom wanted to know.

It only took a few minutes for me to give Blossom the blow by blow.

"You're kidding?" she said when I was finished. "Three dates in and he wants to introduce you to his penis? Even Jimmy wasn't that bad."

Jimmy Stevens was Blossom's recently dumped boyfriend. He was also on the football team, which was something Blossom usually found appealing, but he had been such a jerk the previous month when I thought Blossom had been kidnapped by some creep that she actually decided it was better not to date anybody than to date him. I had to admit, I was impressed by her firm stance about the whole thing. Jimmy had made a couple of attempts to win her back, and she wasn't having any of it.

"The funniest part," I told her, "was that he was so incredulous that I wasn't willing to go along with 'the three date rule.' I mean, three dates? Who makes up this crap?"

Blossom snorted. "The next thing you know, it'll be the thirty-second rule. 'Decide right now if you're going to sleep with me because I've got things to do.' Like guys are so busy

it would kill them if they had to put some effort into being romantic.”

“Yeah, well, Fred drove, and I thought it probably wasn’t the best idea to have him take me home, so...”

“I can give you a ride,” Blossom said. “No problem.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you upset about Fred?” she asked. “Do you need ice cream or something?”

One of the qualities I appreciated about Blossom as my best friend was that she understood the judicious application of ice cream. This was one of the rare occasions from my interactions with boys where a triple fudge sundae wasn’t required. I wouldn’t admit it to Blossom, but I actually felt relieved that Fred and I were no longer dating. “I’m okay,” I assured her.

“Well, I’m not,” she said, frowning and shaking her head. “Who would have thought that a boy in high school would try to pressure a girl into sex before she was ready?” She feigned shock and disgust. “It’s very upsetting. I need a sundae. Stat!”

Chapter 2

On Monday morning, it came as a complete surprise when Fred ambled over to where I was standing in front of my locker. "Can we talk?" he asked.

"Sure," I told him, grabbing the books I needed for my first three classes.

"I mean somewhere private," he explained.

"Oh." I had been expecting Fred to ask if he'd left his letterman jacket at my house or something lame like that. He actually sounded a bit more serious. "I guess so. I could meet you at Cup of Joe's. I'm working after school, but my shift doesn't start until four."

"Okay." He nodded a few times. "See you then."

"What, did Fred lose his letterman jacket or something?" Blossom asked, sauntering over with her arms full of books.

"No." I laughed. "That's what I thought, but it wasn't it."

"What did he want?"

"I don't know." I threw a suspicious look at the departing Fred. "Said he wanted to talk in private."

"Maybe he's pregnant," Blossom suggested with a smirk. "Wouldn't that be a fun switch?"

If I was being honest, I kind of forgot about meeting Fred until the end of the day. When you are living in misery, a lot slips your mind. I was too busy trying to keep my brain focused on my studies and not allow any other thoughts to creep into my head to worry about why Fred Lighton wanted to talk to me. I remembered when he waved at me in the school parking lot. I nodded in return, and we both hopped into our cars. As I started up my ancient VW bug, I chewed on my lip, trying to figure out why Fred wanted to meet me. I really couldn't imagine what there was to talk about, but I was definitely not looking forward to it, whatever it was. Four of the most uncomfortable words in the English language have got to be, *We need to talk*.

"You're early," Joe informed me, automatically glancing at the clock on the wall when I entered the cafe.

"Yeah, well, I'm meeting a friend for a little bit before my shift starts," I told him, stashing my purse behind the counter.

Just then, the bells that hung over the door chimed, and Fred walked in. He smiled at me.

Joe's eyes shifted from Fred to me. He frowned then nodded. "Don't let your friend fill up on too much free biscotti."

As a rule, staff was not allowed to hand out free cappuccinos to friends and family. We could have a drink if on shift, but as Joe frequently said, "I'm here to sell coffee, not give it away to a bunch of teenagers." His comment about the biscotti was his way of telling me I could be exempt from the rule that one time.

Fred didn't drink coffee, which surprised me. Most guys acted like they couldn't put two sentences together unless they had a triple espresso laced with Red Bull. When I asked Fred about his reason for abstaining, he said, "It gives me the shakes." So instead, I made him an Italian lime soda, and we grabbed a booth toward the back. Cup of Joe's was

unusually empty for that time of day. Mornings were the busiest, but many business people would stop by for an afternoon pick-me-up, and high schoolers would swarm the shop in waves if they couldn't think of anything better to do.

We sat there for a few minutes, me waiting for him to say something, Fred looking awkward. Finally, I got things started with, "So... You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah, um..." Fred's complexion grew a few shades pinker. "I thought a lot about what you said the other day in the diner, and I talked to my dad about it..."

"You talked to your dad about it?" I interrupted, a bit incredulous.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?" Fred was confused. "I mean, he's my dad."

"Okay," was all I could think to reply. Dads were kind of an alien concept to me. My dad had left us to marry some younger woman he'd been having an affair with, and we didn't hear from him very often unless he was complaining about having to pay child support. He was pretty much the last person on the planet I would turn to with boy troubles, or any kind of troubles, actually.

"So," Fred continued, "my dad explained to me that guys my age want to have sex because, you know..." He cleared his throat. "It feels good. We don't necessarily connect it to any other emotions besides, you know," his voice dropped in volume and his face grew as red as a beet, "pleasure."

I was feeling pretty embarrassed myself, so I just nodded.

"And he says that girls have sex because they want to feel close to someone. You know, like it's a way to create intimacy."

I nodded again, wondering which teen sex-talk books Mr. Lighton had been reading.

"Anyway, he said that I was expecting stuff way too soon and that you weren't ready to go along with it because

you weren't feeling like you could trust me and be, you know, close. So he said I should just back off and enjoy dating for a while and not get all pressurey about the physical stuff."

"That was the advice your dad gave you?" I couldn't help but be amazed.

"Yeah, well that, and to always use a condom."

Mr. Lighton definitely had my nomination for father of the year.

"So, I wanted to apologize for acting like a tool on Saturday, and I wanted to know if maybe you want to try dating again. But this time without any time limits or pressure or anything." Fred gave me a hopeful smile.

Like I said, I hadn't been all that interested in Fred when he'd initially asked me out, but he was being so understanding and considerate that it made me rethink things. If I hadn't been pining away for someone I would never see again, I would probably have really liked Fred after the heartfelt speech he'd just made. I didn't even know high school boys could act so mature.

"Sure," I told him. "As long as you realize I might never get there, as far as having sex and stuff."

"Okay." Fred reached over and squeezed my hand, a big smile breaking across his face. I hadn't realized before then that he actually had dimples.

I returned his squeeze and forced myself to smile, mentally telling myself, "You have to move on with your life." Plus I didn't want to be a jerk. I was all for Fred being sweet to me, and the least I could do was try to be nice in return.

That was why the whole, "I think I'm falling in love with you" thing was so awkward. Fred had been true to his word about not pressuring me and just trying to have fun. And after several dates, we had progressed from heavy kissing to light petting. I didn't get the same electric thrill that I'd experienced when kissing the boy who had broken

my heart, but it wasn't horrible. In a way, it was kind of comforting. I just hadn't realized that Fred's emotions had progressed so quickly from "It's our third date so you need to put out" to "I'm falling in love with you."

Fred let out a long sigh, leaned back, and closed his eyes. "You're a very hard girl to understand," he said quietly.

I leaned back, too, adjusting my clothes from our rumpling. Fred had left the car's sunroof open a crack to keep the car from getting too steamy, and through it I could glimpse the moon hanging in the sky. It was almost full.

Had it really been a month since the boy who broke my heart had said goodbye? My chest began to ache like it always did when I had an idle moment and thoughts of him crept in. My hand automatically sought the Pools of Light pendant that hung around my neck. It was a round and perfectly clear natural crystal held in place by a belt of silver. The pendant was the only token I had from him, my only memento of Jessie Vanderlind.

Through the sunroof, I glimpsed a large, black shadow passing in front of the moon, briefly eclipsing it. The dark mass wasn't a bird in flight or some errant paper bag caught up in the wind. It was the size and shape of a human.

Chapter 3

Blinking repeatedly, I didn't move for several seconds, just trying to digest what I had seen. Then I sat up so quickly that I bonked my head on the car roof. "Ouch!" I yelped, clamping a hand to my skull but also frantically trying to shove the sunroof open wider.

"What are you doing?" Fred asked, also sitting up and squinting at the roof, trying to figure out what had upset me.

"How do you open the sunroof?" I demanded, scrabbling at it. "Would you open it, please? Open it right now!"

Fred must have taken the urgency that throbbed in my voice seriously because instead of saying something stupid like, "What's your deal?" like a lot of guys would, he leaned forward to press the button that opened the sunroof.

"There," he said as it slid open.

I stood up, thrusting my head out of the car, scanning the sky. The night breeze had a bite to it, and the leaves were quickly falling from the trees but, besides that, nothing. The sky was empty. There was only the dark of night. Had my eyes been playing tricks on me? Did I so desperately want to see Jessie again that my brain had decided to accommodate me?

“What are you doing?” Fred asked, his voice sounding muffled from his seated position in the car.

I wasn’t sure what to tell him. The truth was the most obvious thing and also the answer that sounded the least likely. “I thought I saw a vampire,” I said, retracting myself back into the vehicle.

That earned me a chuckle. “Seriously?”

“No.” I forced myself to laugh a little, too. “I was just feeling kind of claustrophobic and needed some air.”

“Oh,” Fred said glumly. “Was it because of what I said? You know, about how I feel.”

“No,” I assured him, but I’m not sure he believed me. “And about what you said—I’m sorry I reacted the way I did. I like you and all, but I guess I’m not ready to start using the L word or anything like that.”

Fred snorted a little, and I could tell he was annoyed. “You don’t seem to be ready for a lot of things,” he said, crossing his arms.

“I guess not,” was all I could think to say.

We sat there for several moments, me looking at him, Fred glaring out the window. “Are you ready to go home?” he eventually asked. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to make a joke or not.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I’m ready to go home.” In fact, I was champing at the bit to go home, but I couldn’t tell him that.

We climbed into the front seats, and Fred started up the car. What had begun as a fun, casual date had turned into a bit of a disaster, and I felt horrible. I didn’t want to use Fred. And if I hadn’t been so wound up about Jessie, I probably would have really liked him. But I was still mired in heartbreak, so there was nothing I could do.

When Fred pulled up to my house, he didn’t even put the car in park. He just applied his foot to the break and said, “Good night, Aurora,” without even looking in my direction. I took the hint and quickly got out of the car.

"How was your date, honey?" Mom asked as I walked into the living room. She was curled up on the couch, simultaneously cruising the Internet on her laptop and watching TV.

"Not the best," I admitted. "I'm not sure if we're going to go out anymore."

That comment made my mom look up from her typing. "Is anything wrong?" she asked. "Is he being a jerk or something?"

"No," I assured her. "I think it's more me being the jerk."

She shook her head, giving me a confused look.

"I just don't think I like him as much as he likes me," I told her. "It makes me feel kind of bad."

"Oh, I get it." She appeared mildly relieved. "Well, you can't force yourself to like someone. Even if he is pretty cute." Mom had been very complimentary of Fred's appearance when he picked me up for the movies on our first date. "Just try to be honest while still being considerate. That's the best you can do."

I headed upstairs as quickly as I could without arousing suspicion. Once I was inside my room with the door closed, I opened my window that led onto the porch roof and looked out. The wind was picking up, and I shivered when a blast of night air hit me, piercing my clothes. But no one was there.

I don't know what I was expecting. That Jessie would drift out of the sky to perch on the roof like he had done for a few blissful weeks just as school began? I was about to close the window when I heard something. It was very quiet, not even a rustle. It sounded more like someone exhaling. That was the closest I could get to describing it.

My heart started hammering wildly in my chest. Was it him? Was it Jessie, somewhere in the shadows?

I leaned as far as I could out of the window. "Hello?" I called in a quiet voice.

I froze there for a moment, undecided if I should go out on the roof to triple check he wasn't out there or shut the window and spend the next several hours staring at the ceiling in a vain attempt to sleep.

Just as I was deciding that my ears were playing tricks on me along with my eyes, I heard a faint voice replying, "Hello." But it wasn't the warm honey tones of Jessie Vanderlind's voice. It sounded female.

"Hello?" I said again, scanning the night, trying to locate the source of the voice.

"Are you Aurora Keys?" the voice asked, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to be having a conversation out a bedroom window in the middle of the night.

The word *yes* was forming on my lips, but a sudden wave of fear stopped me. There was no reason to tell a random voice in the night who I was. "No," I said, slowly moving back so I was no longer leaning out the window. "I don't know who that is."

"Are you sure?" the voice asked. Whoever she was, she had a bit of an accent that I couldn't place. It sounded European to my inexperienced ears.

"Um, yeah. I'm pretty sure."

"May I come into your house and use your telephone?" the voice asked. "I've had trouble with my car, and I need to call a friend. He's waiting to hear from me about dinner." The voice sounded amused, like she had said something that was a delightful inside joke and she wished someone she knew was around to appreciate it.

My blood ran cold. Jessie had explained to me that the legend about a vampire having to be invited into a home was true. "No," I said, reaching up to grab the window. "There's a gas station a few blocks from here. They have a pay phone." I started sliding the window shut.

"But I've hurt my leg," the voice insisted. "I do not think I could walk that far. Won't you please help me?"

"I could call an ambulance," I told her. "Or the police. Would that help?"

"No, no," the voice said hurriedly. "I just want to come inside and use your phone. It's cold out here, and I will have to wait for a tow truck. Won't you invite me into your home?"

"No," I said slowly. "I think you're better off waiting in your car."

"Aurora." My mom tapped at my door. She opened it and poked her head into my room. "I'm going to bed now, honey. Good night."

"Good night, Mom," I said, practically choking on the words.

As soon as my mom had closed the door again, I whipped my head back around and there, on the other side of the glass of my bedroom window, stood a vampire.

Chapter 4

I knew screaming was a bad idea; that would only bring back my mother, and we would both probably die. But I felt a scream burbling in my throat. It was not the beautiful boy vampire that I had been dreaming of every night for the last month but a lady vampire gazing in at me with eyes like two embers—black on the surface with fire underneath. She must have been turned when she was somewhere in her early thirties, as far as I could guess. She had a head full of corkscrew curls that were fire engine red, and a large, burgundy cloak hung about her shoulders, the wind making it flap slightly.

“I thought you said you’d never heard of the name *Aurora Keys*,” she hissed.

My first impulse was to say “I haven’t” and pretend like I didn’t know what she was talking about, but I knew I had to be very cautious in my decisions when there was a vampire standing on the roof. Quickly, I decided on, “If you were me, would you have said yes?”

The corners of the vampire’s red lips twitched up slightly in a small smirk. “You have a point,” she conceded.

“Is there a reason you’re on my roof in the middle of the night?” I asked in a slightly annoyed voice, trying to

maintain the upper hand.

The vampiress looked me over from head to toe. "You're the little piece of ass that Jessie Vanderlind found so enticing?" Her voice was filled with incredulity.

I wasn't sure how she expected me to respond to that. "I guess."

She shook her head. "Poor Jessie. He has problems."

I reached up and tried to close the window all the way, but quick as a flash, the vampiress jammed the toe of her boot between the window and the sill.

"Listen to me, little human," she hissed, leaning toward the glass. "You are going to open this window and invite me in."

"Take your boot out of the way," I said in response. "This is my home, and you are not welcome."

I must have said the right thing—or maybe the wrong thing—because her eyes began to burn even more intensely than when she'd first appeared. "Just because you know a thing or two, don't think you're actually clever," she snarled, yanking her foot from the sill.

I quickly slammed the window shut. "Thank you," I said, not meaning to be snotty. It was more of a kneejerk response. She just stood there glowering at me. I had the feeling that if I simply closed my curtains, that wouldn't discourage her. She would stand there all night. "Is there any particular reason you're here?" I asked. "I don't see Jessie anymore, if that's your problem." I was trying to sound brave, to be brave, to fight back the panic building in my belly.

"My problem," the vampiress replied, "is that one of my brothers is dead because of you." When I continued to give her a blank stare, she added, "Adami. Count Adami."

"Adami?"

"Oh, come on," she snapped. "How many vampires have you killed? Viktor. Viktor Adami!"

“Viktor was your brother?” I immediately felt bad. Viktor was a psycho, but it was sad to lose a relative.

“No,” she said. “Not in blood, but he was a brother vampire.”

I thought things over a little more. “Viktor was a count?” I couldn’t help but wonder. He did not come across as a count.

My comment caught the vampiress up for a moment. “It was more of an honorary title,” she mumbled, which made me think it wasn’t an actual title.

“Well, I’m sorry your friend is dead,” I told her. “But his death was not my fault.”

“I never said Viktor was my friend,” the vampiress said all too quickly and sounding a bit defensive.

“Oookay...” I gave her a confused look. “Um... I guess I don’t understand what you’re doing here.” My numerous questions and refusal to appear scared were buying me time, if nothing else, while I tried to figure out what to do about there being a bloodthirsty vampire on my porch roof.

She drew herself up, trying to maintain some composure. “I am here to avenge the death of a brother vampire,” she informed me.

“But you didn’t even like Viktor,” I said, making a wild guess. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy a lot of people liked to call friend.

“That is beside the point,” the vampiress said. “To die by the hands of a human is the worst kind of humiliation.”

“But his death was not my fault,” I repeated. “He caused his own death. I just happened to be there.”

“That doesn’t matter,” she insisted. “You are a human, and someone must pay.”

“That’s so unfair,” I insisted. My legs were trembling, but I had to be brave. I had to keep talking. She was, after all, planning to kill me. “This is like in the movies when some nerd wants revenge on some jock, so he does something to humiliate the jock’s girlfriend.”

"No, it's not," she insisted. "It's not like that at all."

"Yes, it is," I fired right back at her. "It's the exact same thing. And quite honestly, I'm surprised that you would do such a thing." I didn't know her from Eve, but shouldn't there be some loyalty of sisterhood between females?

The vampiress frowned, furrowing her brow. "So, you think I should go after Jessie Vanderlind instead?"

"No," I cried. "Of course not." I was trying to save myself, but I didn't want to turn her bloodlust on him. "The only person responsible for Viktor's death was Viktor. I know that's not easy to hear, but it's true."

"That can't be right," she muttered, mostly to herself.

"It's true," I insisted. "He's the one that insulted Jessie. He's the one that came back to insult Jessie again, even after Jessie had made his position perfectly clear. And then, when Jessie had to physically throw Viktor out of his house, the creep decided to come after me as a way to get revenge on Jessie. I mean, what is up with vampires? You seem to have a lot of problems with anger transference." My mom was a therapist, after all. I had picked up some of the lingo.

"You're right," the vampiress sighed. "And to be honest with you, Viktor was always kind of a schmuck." She gave a small shrug. "I don't even think he was a real count."

I began to breathe a little easier. "Okay, well, it was nice talking to you," I told her. "And I know it's still early for you, but it's getting pretty late for me, so I'm going to get going to bed."

"I don't think so," the vampiress said. Her eyes began to burn more intensely again. "You are a human, after all. You were part of Viktor's death, even if you claim you didn't cause it." Then she added, "And besides, I could use a bite."

With the vampire's eyes blazing away, I discovered it was very hard not to look at her. I tried to turn my head but found it challenging to do so. I felt like she was compelling me to look at her. It felt, in a way, like peer pressure. I felt like my entire high school was laughing at me, judging me,

urging me to jump off a very high cliff that I desperately did not want to jump off of.

“Now,” the vampiress said, a smile playing across her lips. “Open the window and invite me in.”

I felt myself bending, my body twisting against my will to obey her command. My brain fought against it. I felt like there was a voice screaming in my head, “Don’t do it!” while my body trembled with the urge to obey.

“No,” I managed to croak out, in a voice just above a whisper, while bracing myself against the window sill. “You are not welcome here. You can’t come in.”

A shocked expression spread across her face, and I felt the souped-up peer pressure release a little. “Open the window,” she ordered. “Invite me in.”

“No,” I said again, feeling a little bit stronger every moment.

“Obey me!” she bellowed, punching the window and causing the glass to crack.

“No!” I said right back, straightening up and glaring at her. “You’re not welcome here, and you can’t come in.”

Fury was written across her face. “I will make you obey me.”

Behind the vampiress, a quiet male voice said, “No, you won’t.”

Chapter 5

“Jessie,” I cried, having to restrain myself from tearing open the window and flinging myself into his arms.

“Vanderlind,” the vampiress snarled.

Jessie was as beautiful as I remembered—his dark wavy hair ruffled, his skin as pale and perfect as alabaster, his eyes as gray as the Atlantic during a storm. The tails of his long, dark coat settled around his calves. I didn’t see him appear on the roof, but I knew he had probably flown very quickly to get there.

“Have you two been formally introduced?” he asked.

“Miss Aurora Keys, this is Miss Ilona Firenze. Ilona’s family is one of the oldest vampire lines,” he told me. Turning to the vampiress, he said, “Aurora and her family are humans and happen to be under my protection.”

Ilona’s lips turned down into a tight sneer. “I didn’t know she was under your protection.”

“Yes, I understand that,” Jessie said, his voice painfully polite. “But now you know. Please spread the word.”

The vampiress sniffed. “I do not understand why you treat your food better than a brother vampire.”

“Aurora is a human, not food,” he said in a stern voice.

“Have it your way.” Ilona gave a small shrug. Then without another word, she turned and, within the blink of an eye, disappeared into the night.

“Jessie,” I gasped, pressing the palms of my hands against the glass of the window. He mirrored me, and we stood there, palm to palm, just looking at each other through the spider web of cracks that Ilona had created with her fist.

“I’m so sorry, Aurora,” he said, his beautiful gray eyes glued to my face.

“It’s not your fault,” I said automatically.

“Yes, it is,” he insisted. “We need to talk.”

Those four words started ricocheting around in my brain. That phrase alone let me know that Jessie had bad news to share, but it was compounded by the grave look on his gorgeous face. The conflict with Ilona and having the boy that I loved so close after so long started to catch up with me. My legs began to shake again, and I could feel water filling my eyes.

Jessie instantly understood that I was upset, and his expression turned to that of compassion. “Oh, my darling,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to the glass. “Don’t cry. Please just open the window.”

His words were all it took for the tears to start cascading down my cheeks. I wrenched open the window, furiously wiping at my face. “You can come in, if you want,” I told him.

For a split second, Jessie moved forward to cross over the threshold into my home, but then his face tightened, and he pulled back. “You mustn’t say that,” he said through clenched lips. “You have to take it back. You have to rescind your invitation.”

“But I don’t want to,” I said. “I just... I just want you to hold me.”

Closing his eyes, his brows drawn down in a severe V, Jessie said, “I know. I feel the same way, but you can’t invite

me into your home. Please, just withdraw your invitation. Tell me I am not welcome. Please."

He looked so genuinely tormented that I forced myself to control my own tears. "You're not welcome in our house," I said in a jagged whisper. "I take back my invitation."

His body visibly relaxed, his shoulders drooping slightly. He opened his eyes. "Thank you," he said in a voice no more steady than my own. He knelt down to sit on the roof of the porch, just like he used to do before he decided it was too dangerous for us to be together. "Please sit with me. There are things I have to tell you," he said.

I knelt down, meaning to just lean on the window sill like I used to when we would rendezvous each night for conversations about his life being a vampire. I had every intention of being calm and listening to what he had to say.

Somehow, I found myself lunging out the window, tears still streaking my face. Jessie grabbed me about the waist and pulled me into his lap, his lips finding mine, our embrace stealing my breath.

I don't know how long we kissed. It could have been an hour or only a few seconds. I only know that all the noise that had been blaring in my head since the last time I saw him was suddenly silenced. The heavy weight that had been pressing down on my chest for weeks and weeks finally lifted.

Eventually, I needed to catch my breath and pulled back slightly. "Oh, my darling," Jessie whispered, burying his face into the tempest of curls that was my hair and inhaling deeply. "I have missed you so much."

My heart was about to burst with joy. For weeks, I had tortured myself with thoughts that he didn't really care about me. That he was only attracted to me because I reminded him of a girl he used to love decades before I was even born. "Are you hurt?" Jessie asked. "Did Ilona get to you?"

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m fine. But I don’t understand what was going on with Ilona. It felt like she was trying to control me, like she was somehow mentally compelling me to open the window and invite her in.”

Jessie did not lift his head from where he had burrowed. “Some vampires have influence over humans. It very much plays upon a human’s base need to please and fit in. It takes a strong will not to give in to their wishes.”

“Oh,” I said softly. That explained why it felt so very much like peer pressure.

After several more minutes of the two of us just sitting there, our arms wrapped around each other, breathing in each other’s scent, Jessie stiffened a little and said, “I have things to tell you. I think it’s best if you go back into your house now.”

“But I don’t want to,” I said, sounding like a sullen child. “Why can’t we talk out here?”

“Because there are important things that I need to tell you, and I need to be able to concentrate,” he said, his voice firm. “And besides,” he said, swallowing, “I haven’t eaten in a long time.”

I was in love with Jessie, but I wasn’t suicidal. When a vampire tells me that he is hungry, I listen. I quickly disengaged myself and shimmied back through the window.

Once I was situated safely inside the house, I turned back to Jessie and waited. I didn’t want to prompt him into action with any questions because that would mean our time together would end all the more quickly. It made me happy just to gaze at his beautiful face. I was almost disappointed when he began to speak.

“You remember who the Bishops are, don’t you?” he began.

I nodded. “Kind of,” I told him. “You said they were a vampire family that you guys use as kind of a governing body.”

“They are the oldest vampire family in our recorded history,” Jessie explained. “That’s why they are frequently referred to as The First Family. And yes, they do govern us.”

Keeping a family going after one member was turned into a vampire, if he decided to convert the rest of the family, took a lot of planning. “How have they kept their line going for so long?” I had to wonder.

“It’s not easy. And there’s a lot of work to be done as far as governing, so the Bishops sometimes adopt vampires from other families to help ease the load.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t sure where he was going with this topic.

Jessie sighed and then ran his fingers through his hair several times. I had to assume this habit was leftover from his human days. “Well, the Bishops are not pleased about Viktor’s death,” he finally said. “In fact, they are very displeased.”

“But...” I had thought Viktor was out of our lives, but staking him apparently wasn’t the end of it. “Can’t you just explain to them that he was trying to kill me and you were just defending me? He was the one that kept coming after you. It’s not like you were bothering him.”

“I know, and I’ve tried to explain that, but not all vampires value humans the way I do. That’s why Ilona was here.”

“She didn’t even like Viktor,” I grumbled.

“Yes, but she is very caught up in the honor of vampires,” Jessie told me. “Plus,” his voice audibly dropped in volume, “there might have been a little envy there. Her honor might not have been so offended if I hadn’t injured her pride.”

“What?” I asked, not sure that I’d heard him correctly.

If a vampire could blush, I’m sure Jessie would have been red. “She was interested in me romantically a couple of decades ago, and I didn’t feel the same,” he admitted.

“Romantically?” I was surprised. “She has to be in her thirties. Isn’t that a bit pervy?”

Jessie shrugged. “She was just turned later in her human life than I was.”

“But still.” I couldn’t wrap my head around it.

“In vampire years, I’m older than her.”

“You weren’t interested?” I asked. Ilona was beautiful, in a bloodthirsty sort of way.

“No.” He shook his head. “I’ve only ever loved two girls in my life, neither one of them being a vampire.”

I felt a wave of pleasure wash over me. Was that Jessie’s way of saying he loved me? Was it safe to assume I was the second girl?

When Jessie was first turned, about eighty years ago, he fell deeply in love with my great grandmother’s sister, Colette Gibson. He’d wanted to conjoin with her, which was vampire speak for when a vampire marries a human. If he’d done it, he would have never been able to be with another person—human or vampire. Colette would have been his only love, no matter how long he lived. But on the night they were to run away together, she disappeared, never to be heard from again. My great grandma Gibson was still alive, and she still mourned the loss of her sister. She was in her nineties, and her mind was starting to go, so she usually called me Lettie when I went to visit her at the old age home. I apparently had a passing resemblance to her sister, but Colette was supposed to have been the town beauty, so it couldn’t have been that close of a resemblance.

I used to find it disturbing when Grandma Gibson mistook me for a girl who more than likely had been murdered. But after meeting Jessie and learning more about his relationship with Lettie, the dreams I’d had since childhood made a lot more sense. I wasn’t sure that I believed in reincarnation, but I knew that I was somehow connected to Jessie Vanderlind, and that was more than likely through my long lost ancestor.

"After Viktor died, I contacted the authorities and explained what happened," Jessie went on. "I wanted them to hear it from me first and not through rumors. Viktor wasn't very well liked in our community, and I think most vampires just assumed it was only a matter of time before he pushed someone too far. But then word got to the Bishops about your involvement." Jessie stared at his hands, knitting his fingers together. I longed to reach out and give them a reassuring squeeze. "I had tried to downplay your part in it, just focus on the conflict with Viktor and myself. And no one was at the pier when Viktor died besides us, so I wasn't too worried. But I'm afraid there's going to be an official inquest."

"Okay," I said. "What does that mean?"

He took a deep breath. "It means we have to go to Budapest."

"Budapest?" I repeated, my brain not really taking it in.

"I'm afraid so," Jessie replied.

"Budapest as in..." I tried hard to recall my lessons in geography. "Budapest as in Hungary?" I guessed.

"Precisely. That's where most of the Bishops live. It's our base of government."

"Jessie, I can't just drop everything and go to Hungary," I told him. "I'm in high school. What would I tell my mom?"

His brows narrowed as if he'd never considered the logistics of getting a high school girl to Europe without alarming her parent. "I don't know," he admitted. "But we have to figure something out."

"Can't we just Skype or something?" I asked. "I mean, I really can't just sneak off to Budapest. You need to explain to the Bishops that I can't take the time off of school. If they really need to see me, we can maybe figure something out for Christmas break. Fake an exchange program or something."

Shaking his head, Jessie said, "The Bishops won't accept that."

"I'm afraid they're going to have to," I insisted.

"Aurora, please listen." He reached through the open window and took my hand, sending tingles up my spine. "You are in grave danger. The Bishops do not suffer excuses. We have to figure something out."

The sternness of his voice, tinged with desperation, made me afraid. Not that he would harm me, but I knew he wouldn't frighten me unnecessarily, so I had to take the situation seriously. I couldn't begin to fathom a lie that would be believable enough to fool my mother. Plus what was I supposed to do about school? And paying for a ticket to Budapest? And, well... everything. "I don't even have a passport," I finally managed to squeak.

A small smile began to form on Jessie's lips. I assumed it was more caused by relief than happiness. He realized that he had gotten through to me. "That's okay," he said. "We'll need to get you a fake one, anyway."

"What?" I stammered with the realization that, on top of everything else, forged government documents would be involved. "Why?"

"Because you're a minor in the eyes of the law, so we need to make you over eighteen. Plus you'll be flying with a corpse, so it'll help if you're older. Things might get a bit tricky."

"I'm going to what?" I exclaimed.

"It's not that easy for vampires to fly," he said. "I mean, when we have to do it by plane. Very few flights happen only at night. Plus, there is no direct flight from Tiburon, Ohio, to Budapest."

"So... How does this work?" I asked.

"If for some reason we have to take a plane, vampires need a human escort to ferry them through customs and everything. You'll have to see me through."

"You mean you'll be in a..." I couldn't bring myself to say the word *coffin*. I had accepted that vampires existed, and I knew Jessie was a vampire. But he was so full of life, so beautiful, sitting there talking, holding my hand. It was hard to realize that he was actually the undead. If I was to press my ear against his chest, there would be no heartbeat.

"Normally, when I visit Budapest, I fly in stages. But without the airplane. And just stay at safe houses during the day," Jessie explained.

"Well, why don't you just do that?" I asked. "I can meet you there." I didn't want to let on that I was feeling a bit panicked about the flying-with-a-corpse thing.

Jessie shook his head. "I thought about that. It will look better if we travel together."

"What do you mean, 'look better.' Why do we have to worry about that?"

"We have to convince the Bishops that we are close," he said, his voice dropping in volume.

My heart quickened a beat. "How close?" I asked, tilting my head to the side and pressing my hand to my cheek.

"Very close." Jessie looked out into the night, then back at me, then into the night again. Finally, he said, "We have to convince the Bishops that we intend to be conjoined."

"What are you talking about?" I gasped, finding myself barely able to breathe. "Conjoined?" I wondered what it felt like to hyperventilate and if I should get a paper bag. "You mean, they think... You want them to think..."

"Breathe, Aurora," Jessie said, placing his hand on my arm. Physical contact was not helping me to become calm. "I told the Bishops that we intend to wed as vampire and human. They have to believe it. We must make them believe it."

"But why?" I could see spots behind my eyes. I wondered if I should put my head between my knees.

“Aurora,” he said, his voice cracking. “If they think that I simply killed a vampire to save a human, it’ll be a death sentence for you, and I will be buried alive for a hundred years.”

“It’ll... what?”

Jessie closed his eyes and sighed. “The Bishops don’t believe a vampire should ever value a human’s life over a fellow vampire. I had to tell them that we were in love and intended to be conjoined.”

“You did?” I gulped.

“It was the only way to spare your life. And everything was going fine. I’m in good standing with the Bishops, so they believed me. But then someone from the party wrote to the Bishops, telling them that we’d only known each other briefly.”

“Why would someone do that?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “Why would Ilona hunt you down when she didn’t actually care about Viktor? Vampires are very proud.”

“So, now what?” I asked, feeling the worst was yet to come.

“We have to go to Budapest,” he said. “And we need to convince the Bishops that we are in love and intend to be conjoined because...” Jessie drew a deep breath and then blurted, “Because you’re the reincarnation of Colette Gibson.”

Chapter 6

I wished it was still appropriate for women to swoon because that was what I felt like doing. The spots in front of my eyes got much worse. "But..." I stuttered. "But I'm not the reincarnation of..."

"No, you are," Jessie said in an urgent voice. "You have to convince yourself that you are."

"But, I don't..." The world was spinning slightly to the left, and I braced myself with a hand on each side of the windowsill. "Jessie, I'm not Colette. I don't want to be Colette. I'm Aurora, and that's all there is to it."

"I know," he insisted. "I know you're Aurora. Trust me, I know. But for your own sake, you have to convince yourself that you're her. You have some of Colette's memories. You've even said that yourself. You dream some of her memories, so you are connected to her in some way." Jessie leaned forward to grip me by the shoulders, his voice taking on a new intensity. "We have to convince the Bishops that you're Colette. They have to believe it without reservation. If they have even an ounce of doubt, they could rule against us and then... And then..." Jessie's eyes were blazing, and he was squeezing my shoulders so hard they began to throb. He

was even shaking me just a little in his desperation to get his point through to me.

"Ow..." I let out a small whimper.

Realizing what he was doing, Jessie gulped and released me. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said, massaging my shoulders. "And I believe you. But I still don't see a way I can drop everything and take off for Budapest. Not without freaking my mom out."

"Having you disappear for a few days is nothing compared to you disappearing forever," Jessie said in a barely audible voice.

"How long do we have?" I asked. "Can you stall them for a couple of weeks while we try to figure something out?"

Jessie thought about it, but even as he was doing so, he was shaking his head. "I could try," he finally said. "But every day we delay, you are in more danger."

Mentioning my mother had given me an idea. It was probably the best chance we had although we would have to act quickly. Still, I wasn't ready to share it with Jessie yet. I had to think it over and decide if I was willing to do something that would hurt my mother a great deal but at least give me a few days to jet off to Hungary and try to explain to a bunch of vampires why they should spare my life. "I might have a plan," I said.

"What is it?" Jessie asked eagerly.

"I don't want to tell you," I said. "Not yet. I want to think it through."

He pinched his lips together, as if to swallow words that were already on his tongue. "I understand," he said after several moments. "Would tomorrow night be enough time for you to think it through?"

I shrugged, letting out a large sigh. "I guess it'll have to be."

"Until tomorrow then. Good night," he whispered before gathering his legs under him and launching off the

porch roof. It was only a second before he had disappeared into the night.

As soon as he was gone, I closed the window and drew the curtains. If Ilona was out there, who knew how many other vampires were skulking around, waiting to taste my blood. The mere thought of it gave me chills, and I hurriedly got ready for bed.

With the covers pulled up under my chin, I stared at the ceiling, wide awake. My right hand sought my Pools of Light pendant, and I slid the smooth crystal back and forth across my lips, like I always did when I lay awake at night thinking of Jessie.

If Jessie could stall the Bishops for a few days then I could probably swing a lie that would enable me to sneak off to Budapest. The only problem was, the lie would hurt my mother very deeply, and I just hated to do that to her.

Still, me being killed as retribution because some stupid vampire didn't understand that no meant no was not a good alternative. I was sure my mother would never know what happened to me, and that would be a much worse torture than the hurtful betrayal I had in mind. I sighed, feeling the weight of hurting someone I loved creeping over me.

For weeks I had dreamed of seeing Jessie again. Then he returned to my life only to tell me that I was in danger and more than likely going to be killed. It wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind when I had thought of seeing him again. My fantasies had drifted more toward passionate kissing and exchanging tender words as we pulled at the openings in each other's clothing.

I lay awake so long that when I finally fell asleep, I didn't even realize that I had. My conscious thoughts slipped seamlessly into the unconscious world without me realizing I was dreaming. There was a tap at the window, and I sprang

from my bed convinced it was Jessie. I yanked open the curtain expecting to see his handsome face, ruffled hair, and twinkling gray eyes. Instead, it was all the popular kids from high school crowded on the porch roof, their eyes glowing in that same intense way that Ilona's had. They were all avidly staring at me. Blossom was in the crowd with them. She stepped forward, knocked lightly on the window, and said with a smile, "Hey, Aurora. It's cold out here. Why don't you invite us in?"

I automatically reached for the window latch, but when I did so there was some eager giggling amongst the popular kids, a couple of the boys elbowing each other. It made me pause. "I can't right now," I told her. "My mom wants me to do a bunch of stuff."

"Come on, Aurora." Blossom let a small whine seep into her voice. "Open up. I've got to pee."

"Yeah, let us in. Please?" Fred was standing next to her, although I hadn't noticed him before.

"I really can't," I told him.

"Come on." He gave me an encouraging smile. "It's not that big of a deal."

"Yeah, don't be lame," a popular jock at Fred's elbow said. "Just open the window and invite us in. Where's your sense of hospitality?"

"My what?" I asked. I knew what hospitality meant, but I was surprised that El Jocko knew the definition.

"Oh, screw this," said a cheerleader, elbowing her way through the crowd. For some reason, she was dressed in her uniform like they always are on TV. "Are you going to invite us in or not?" she demanded.

I shook my head, unable to force the word *no* to come out of my mouth. Still, I was able to stop myself from reaching for the window.

The cheerleader bent down, extended one finger, and began scratching a circle in the glass near where the latch was on the inside. Her nail cut through the glass like a

diamond always does in the movies—which is a good way to screw up your diamond in real life. After she was done, she rapped on the glass with her knuckle, causing the little circle she'd cut to fall into my room. Then she snaked her hand through the hole and undid the latch, pushing the window open. "Now," she said, smiling like she'd just been announced as homecoming queen, "invite us in."

Cold air whipping through my room shocked me out of my slumber. I sprang from the bed and slammed the window shut. I yanked the curtains closed so fast I almost pulled them off the rod. Parting them a crack, I peeked out into the night. There was nothing. At least nothing that I could see. I slid my hands over the cold glass. The spider web cracks were still there from Ilona, but there was no hole near the latch. Quickly, I pulled the curtains back shut. I couldn't stop shivering as I wondered how my window had gotten open. There was no doubt in my mind I'd locked it after Jessie left.

A loud rustling somewhere in the backyard startled me, and I scanned the area with one eye, peeking between the pulled curtains. It was so dark I could barely see anything, but I felt like there were a hundred eyes focusing on me. How many of the undead were concealed in the trees, watching the puny human, waiting for her to make a mistake?

I had to betray my mother. There was no other option. It would hurt her, and I hated to do it, but the alternative was so much worse.

Chapter 7

I only managed to fall asleep as the sun was starting to rise. I was so grateful that it was Sunday and I had the day off from Cup of Joe's. I'd spent most of the night clutching a wooden drumstick that some drummer had thrown to me during a concert last summer. It's not like the band was a big act or anything, but the guy had specifically tossed the drumstick to me, so I kept it. I was glad I did because it was the closest thing I could find in my bedroom to a functioning stake.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Mom said when I finally stumbled downstairs and trudged into the kitchen. "It's after noon. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, fine," I told her, opening the refrigerator. "I actually went to bed pretty early, but then a bird or something slammed into my window and scared the poop out of me."

"Really?" My mom looked up from her paperwork which was spread out across the kitchen table.

"Yeah. I'm really sorry, but I checked this morning, and there are some small cracks in the glass. Whatever it was, it hit the window really hard."

“Oh.” Mom frowned and went to stand up. “That can’t be good. Did you look outside to see if there’s a bird or anything injured out there?”

“I already checked and didn’t see anything,” I assured her, causing her to settle back into her chair. “Whatever it was either flew away or some other animal got it.” My mom was a sucker for wounded animals, and I didn’t want her crawling around on her hands and knees in the backyard trying to see if some poor sparrow was hiding under the shrubbery.

Opening the refrigerator, I grabbed some jelly and the orange juice. Since it was so late, I decided I’d do a breakfast-lunch combo for one big meal. I gathered the rest of what I needed for a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich plus orange juice, a banana, and a few slices of bacon, which I tossed in a frying pan. Our stove was pretty old, so it didn’t ignite on its own anymore. Every day was an adventure of trying to get a match close enough to light the gas while staying far enough away to avoid getting singed.

While the bacon sizzled, I sat down at the far end of the table to construct my sandwich and talk to my mom. “What are the plans for Thanksgiving this year?” I asked in as casual a voice as I could muster.

Mom looked up from her work. “I don’t know, honey. Probably your Aunt Sue’s, like usual.” Aunt Sue wasn’t really my aunt. She was my mom’s best friend since college. She and her husband didn’t have any kids. After my dad left, we started driving up to Cleveland to make kind of an orphan’s Thanksgiving. We used to take Grandma Gibson with us before we had to put her in the nursing home. The last two years, we just stopped to see her on the way out of town. It’s not a super long drive. A little over an hour, but Grandma gets a little fretful if she’s in the car too long.

“If I wasn’t here for Thanksgiving, would you still do the same thing?”

Mom frowned slightly. “I guess. Why do you ask?”

“Well...” I spread a little peanut butter on a slice of bread, finding it difficult to meet her eye. “Would it totally freak you out if maybe I wanted to do Thanksgiving with Dad this year?”

I saw several emotions flicker over my mom’s face: shock, hurt, anger, and then finally concern. “Sweetie, Thanksgiving’s Thursday. That’s kind of short notice.”

“I know, but all I’d have to do is drive down there.” My dad lived in Lexington, Kentucky, which was a little under five hours by car. “I could take off school on Wednesday and help cook the turkey and everything.”

“Have you spoken to your father lately? Did he invite you for a visit?” Mom wanted to know. I could tell she was trying to be cool about the whole thing, but it was a challenge.

“Not exactly,” I told her. “It was just something I was thinking about doing, but I wanted to run it by you first.”

“I’m not quite sure what to say, Aurora,” she said, spreading her hands in the air, palms up. “I think it’s natural for you to want to have a relationship with your father, and I think it’s healthy for a girl to have a positive male role model in her life.” She chewed her bottom lip for a moment. “I’m just not sure your father is it.”

“I’m not sure I was thinking of him as a role model,” I quickly assured her. “I was just wondering what he’s like. I mean, I was just a little kid when he left. I only have these little kid memories of him. Maybe it’s time I get to know him as a grownup. I mean, not that I’m exactly grown up, but you know what I mean.”

Mom got up from her chair and came around the table to where I was seated. She bent down and gave me a squeeze. “I think you should give him a call,” she said, her voice sounding a bit thicker than usual. “As long as you don’t get your hopes up. I mean, he hasn’t bothered to reach out to you in a long time and might not want to now. I just

don't want you to get hurt if he blows you off or flat out says no."

"I understand," I told her, wrapping my arms over hers. "And hell, even if he does invite me for Thanksgiving, he might act like a total jerk when I get there. Who knows?"

Mom kissed me on the crown of my head. "Have you thought about the Tammy factor?"

Tammy was the woman my dad left us for ten years ago. I say woman, but she was barely twenty when the affair was discovered. Mom found out Dad had a secret cell phone. A little research revealed that he had been slutting around on her for more than a year. To make matters a million times worse, Tammy had been barely legal when the affair started. My dad had been cheating on my mom with a girl who was literally two years older than I was at that exact moment. Bluck!

Tammy had been extra nasty when my mom finally confronted my dad and everything fell apart. The one time I met her, she actually said to me, "Your mom is a real bitch. You know that?" As if it was Mom's fault for getting upset that she caught her husband cheating. And besides, who says that to a seven-year-old? Even being so little, I knew it was wrong.

I had been eating butterscotch pudding at the time and threw it at her. Right at her head. After that, she refused to be in the same room with me and made damn sure my dad never was, either. It was hard to imagine what she would say if I actually intended to visit my dad for Thanksgiving. She would probably be worried that I planned on dumping a bowl of stuffing on her head. It was almost worth getting my dad to say yes just to provoke her for a few days before I cancelled. Although I would never actually go to see the two of them in a million years. Not on a bet. Not even for a large sum of money. There are some betrayals that should never be forgiven.

Suddenly there was a loud mechanical shrieking sound, and I jumped out of my chair. It was the kitchen smoke detector. “Oh, crud!” I had let the bacon burn. I dashed for the stove as Mom hurriedly opened the kitchen windows.

Once I’d cleaned up from my half-burnt meal, I headed upstairs to make the phone call I really didn’t want to make. I’d given up trying to have a relationship with my dad years ago, but if I was going to follow through with sneaking off to Budapest, I had to make my lie look as real as possible. This included phone records. It occurred to me as I dialed that if I was killed as retribution for Viktor’s death then my dad and Tammy would end up being the prime suspects in my disappearance. I was pretty sure the Bishops wouldn’t be stupid enough to leave a corpse behind. It was gallows humor, but it made me smirk a little bit thinking about the police knocking on my dad’s door.

“Hello?” A snippy female voice caught the phone on the second ring.

“Hi, Tammy. Is my dad around?” I asked, trying to sound as pleasant as I could muster.

“Who is this?” she demanded, her voice carrying the growl of mistrust. I guess when you get a guy by stealing him from his wife, you’re always a little suspicious that someone else might be trying to do the same thing.

“It’s Aurora,” I told her. How many people called up and asked to speak to Dad? There was just me, as far as I knew.

“Hold on.” There was a muffled conversation that I couldn’t hear clearly, but a few words leaked through including “why” plus “she” and “not.” When Tammy got back on the phone, she said, “He’s not here right now.”

I didn’t know if he was refusing to talk to me or if she was refusing to let him talk to me. It really didn’t matter. I

pushed forward with, "Tammy, I could hear him talking. Just put my dad on the phone, please."

There was a bit of rustling and then, "Hello, sweetheart, it's your father," in a very forced voice.

I wanted to say, "No duh. I'm the one that called you," or something like that, but instead I said, "Hi, Dad."

"How are you?" he asked, but before I could reply he added, "Is everything all right? Why are you calling?"

"Everything's fine," I assured him. I couldn't blame him for being a little alarmed. I couldn't remember the last time we spoke. "I just wanted to see how you are doing."

To be honest, I really didn't care how he was doing. I was just trying to fill up time on the phone so that the call would last a few minutes. He yammered something about his work and his wife and some vacation they went on to the Bahamas. I found it very interesting that he constantly fought paying child support because he claimed he was too poor, but a trip to some tropical island was not a problem.

After he'd talked at me for a few minutes, I interrupted him with, "What are you doing for Thanksgiving this year?"

"Not much. Probably the same as last year," he said, not yet suspicious of what I had planned. "Tammy doesn't really like touching dead meat."

I decided not to ask what he meant by *dead meat* and just forged ahead with, "So I know it's last minute, but I was thinking maybe I could drive down and spend Thanksgiving with you this year."

There was silence on the other end of the line. I knew I'd blindsided him, so I gave him a few seconds to absorb my proposal. I could hear Tammy's sharp voice in the background demanding, "What does she want?"

My dad's voice became muffled. I assumed because he was clamping a hand over the receiver. "She wants to come in for Thanksgiving."

"What?" I could hear the outrage in Tammy's voice. Even though they had been together for ten years, she

obviously still felt threatened by me and my mom.

“Um. Sweetie?” My dad came back on the line.
“Thanksgiving’s Thursday.”

“Why don’t I give you a little time to think about it,” I said hurriedly. “I mean, I did just spring the idea on you.” I wanted a reason to call back so phone records would show that we’d had more than one conversation if things didn’t go my way in Budapest. “Bye, Dad.” I hung up before he could say anything else.

For some reason, my hands were trembling. I couldn’t decide if it was from realizing how very little my dad loved me or from lying so that I could sneak off to Europe to face some crazed vampire inquest. Probably a little bit of both.

There was a gentle tapping at my door. “Aurora?” Mom poked her head in. “I was thinking about going to visit your Grandma Gibson. If you want to go with me, we can grab some dinner afterward.”

Chapter 8

I really wasn't in the mood to visit my great grandmother in the old age home. That sounds a bit harsh, but it was never as simple as dropping by for a nice chat over lemonade. Grandma Gibson was in her nineties and suffered from dementia. She rarely recognized me as Aurora and frequently spoke to me as if I was Colette, her long-lost sister and Jessie's long-lost love.

It is creepy being mistaken for a dead girl. It's even creepier when you supposedly look like her and frequently have dreams that are alarmingly close to what were probably Colette's memories. With all that said, it wasn't right to leave my poor great grandma to sit by herself day after day just because she freaked me out a little. I knew I'd want company once I got old. If I was lucky enough to grow old and not end up a morality tale for girls who get involved with vampires.

I agreed to go, of course. I felt bad enough about lying to my mother as it was. The least I could do was spend a little time with her. I got cleaned up and we headed over to the Ashtabula Home for Elder Care. As usual, Grandma Gibson wasn't in the common area playing bingo with the other residents; she was in her room, seated at a small table

with a deck of cards laid out before her in neat rows in a never-ending game of solitaire. It was probably never ending because she rarely touched the cards, just spent a lot of time staring at them, lost in thought.

"Hello, Gram Gram," Mom said, forcing her voice to sound cheerful as we entered the room. It was always the most tense at that exact moment when visiting, when we didn't know what kind of day Grandma was having but were still hopeful.

"Who is it?" Grandma Gibson looked up at us, squinting and blinking.

"It's me, your granddaughter, Helen. And your great granddaughter, Aurora."

Grandma broke into a wide smile and lifted her arms toward us. "Helen! How nice of you to come see me." Her eyes shifted in my direction, and she lifted one of her hands toward me in greeting. "Aurora! Come give me a kiss. Oh, you always remind me of my dear Lettie so much."

I could feel Mom let out a breath of air she had been holding, and I realized as I crossed the room that I had been unconsciously doing the same. Grandma Gibson was having a good day. It was going to be a good visit.

"What have you been up to, Grams?" Mom asked as we both took a seat, Mom at the table with Grandma, me on the bed because there wasn't another chair. "Have you made friends with any of the other residents yet?" she asked. Mom always hoped for this, but so far she wasn't having any luck.

"Oh, you know me," Grandma Gibson replied. "I like to keep to myself and my cards." She tapped the cards laid out in front of her. It might have been my imagination, but I thought she shot a look in my direction.

There was a few more minutes of light conversation, and then Grandma shivered. "It's chilly in here," she said. "Helen, would you be a dear and find Gerald? He's an orderly here, and I believe he has my blue sweater."

"I can do it," I said, popping up off the bed, eager to do something useful.

"No, let your mom do it," Grandma Gibson said to me. "That way we have a few minutes to talk."

"Sure thing, Grams," Mom said, getting to her feet and heading out of the room.

As soon as she was gone, Grandma turned to me, her face taking on more of a shrewd expression. "Come sit near me," she said, indicating the chair Mom had just vacated.

"Okay," I said, feeling guilty for no obvious reason.

"You're planning a trip soon?" Grandma asked, but it came out more like a statement than a question.

I glanced over my shoulder in the direction that my mother had just departed. There was no way she'd told about Thanksgiving without me knowing. I'd been in the room with them the entire time.

"Um, yeah," I stuttered. "Maybe. I might go see my dad over Thanksgiving."

Grandma clucked her tongue and moved around some of the cards that were in the neat rows laid out before her. "You should always tell me the truth, Aurora. There's no reason to lie to me."

"Well, I'm not exactly sure if I'm going yet," I told her. "I mean, Mom and I have talked about it, but Dad didn't sound too excited when I called him."

"Oh?" she said with a sigh. She looked directly into my face, her expression a little sad. Or maybe just disappointed. "I didn't know you needed a passport to go to Lexington."

"You don't," I said quickly. "I mean, you don't need one to go anywhere in the United States. I mean, as an American."

Nodding toward the small stack of cards that hadn't been laid out on the table yet, she asked, "Will you cut the cards for me?"

"Okay." I pinched about half the pile between my fingers and put them next to the original stack, adding the

rest on top afterward.

Grandma snatched up the top card and gave it a hard look. "People always underestimate the old," she said, letting her eyes drift over the rest of the cards, trying to decide where to place the one she was holding. "Especially once they think your brain has started to go." She tapped at her temple with a finger that trembled slightly. "But I see things more clearly now than I ever did in my youth. The staff here," she waved her hand in the air to indicate the care facility, "they call it dementia. But they don't understand." Grandma looked into my face, her eyes steady and the palest of blue. "I can see into the past," she said. "Not just memories. I can see it. I can access parts of my brain that I never could before."

"I believe you," was all I could think to say. She was looking at me so intensely it was impossible to say anything else.

"And that's not all. At least not for me." Grandma placed the card, the king of hearts, down on the longest stack, completing a run of ace through king. "Some people here are happy to just live inside their memories. To relive a few good days over and over again. But for me, it isn't that easy." She slid the suit of cards into a pile and squared them off on the top of the table. "Because you can live the bad days over and over again, too," she said, a slight quaver in her voice. I knew right away she was thinking of the day her sister disappeared.

"Well, I wasn't going to go along with that nonsense," Grandma Gibson said, clearing her throat. "I decided if I could see into the past then I could probably see into the future if I tried hard enough." She raised her chin, giving me a triumphant look. "And I can."

This statement caught me off guard. "You can what?" I asked.

"I can see into the future."

"Um. Okay, Grandma." I had thought she was having a good day but obviously not.

"You don't believe me?" She gave me sharp look. "Then how did I know you were planning a trip?"

"I uh... I'm not sure. Maybe my mom told you, and you just don't remember."

"When did she tell me?" Grandma was not backing down.

"I don't know," I had to admit.

"Aurora, you might think I'm crazy, but I'm asking you, as your great grandmother, don't go," she said in a hushed voice, reaching out and clutching my hand. "You don't have to go."

"Come on, Grams. It's just Lexington. I'll be all right."

Grandma shook her head. "That's what you told your mother, but I know the truth."

"Why would you say that?" I asked, barely resisting the urge to pull my hand away from her grasp.

"I've seen it," she said, her eyes wide as saucers. She rose slightly from her chair, but it wasn't like she was trying to stand. It was almost like she was levitating. All the while staring at the tabletop, but staring at nothing. It was like she was looking into a giant void. "You go where tongueless lions guard the water. And you plan to go with that creature. The one that killed Colette!"

"He did not!" The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"A-ha!" she exclaimed, dropping back into her chair. By breaking out of her trance she released my hand so abruptly that I almost toppled over. "So, you do know what I'm talking about."

"No, I don't," I insisted. "I don't know anything about tongueless lions."

"Hey. What's going on?" Mom asked as she entered the room.

“Aurora told me she was thinking of visiting her dad for Thanksgiving,” Grandma Gibson said, shooting me a dark look. “And I was telling her that I thought it was a bad idea.”

Well, I’m sorry it upset you,” Mom said, walking over and placing a hand on her grandmother’s shoulder to calm her. “But it is her choice. I mean, Barry is her dad.”

“I just think someone might get hurt,” Grandma said in a sulky voice.

“I love you, Grams, but I won’t get hurt,” Mom said. “You can’t think that Barry can hurt me now.”

Grandma Gibson reached up and squeezed Mom’s hand. “I know you’re strong, dear,” she said. “I’m more worried about Aurora.”

Chapter 9

It was amazing how frequently my great grandmother freaked me out. You wouldn't think a woman in her nineties would be so good at it, but she definitely had a talent. Mom knew something was wrong when we went to dinner, but she held back from grilling me, which I appreciated. About halfway through our meal at Minerva's Family Restaurant, she did finally crack a little with, "Aurora, I'm trying not to pry, but did your father give you any kind of answer about Thanksgiving?"

"He's thinking about it," I told her, which was almost the truth. "He needs to talk to Tammy, but it sounds like he might say yes." Mom nodded and went back to her steak.

While Mom was getting the check, I pulled out my phone, something that I hadn't bothered to do all day. There were two calls from Fred, which I hadn't known about because I had the ringer turned off. No messages, but he had sent a text. "Hey, beautiful. Where are you?"

I felt my stomach drop. I hadn't thought of Fred once in the last twenty-four hours. That was not the mark of a good girlfriend. This thought made me feel even worse. I was Fred's girlfriend. And I had been kissing another boy.

The fact that the boy was actually an almost-hundred-year-old vampire that I might have been in love with in a past life was beside the point. Cheating was cheating. And I wasn't the kind of girl who cheated, not even on a guy I wasn't crazy about. I quickly wrote him back, "Visiting Grandma Gibson in the old folks home. Fun." Then, after a few seconds hesitation, I added, "I think we need to talk," before hitting send. A few more seconds after that I regretted having included the word *Fun* in my text. I didn't want to sound callous.

Mom suggested a movie after our meal, but I told her I had homework to do so that I would be at my bedroom window by nine o'clock, the time Jessie would more than likely make his appearance. As it was, I barely had time to get cleaned up for his arrival. I hadn't showered earlier in the day. I was very jittery as I fixed my hair. Some girls try to fluff their hair to make it fuller as they blow it dry. If I tried that, it would look like I was wearing a cone of cotton candy on my head. All my hairstyling attempts were directed toward de-volumizing my bumper crop of dark curls.

Grandma Gibson's words plagued me. She'd said a lot of scary things to me in the past while hallucinating that I was her sister, Colette, but this was different. This was some freaky, fortune-telling stuff. Could she really see into the future? My first instinct was *no, of course not*. But if you'd asked me three months ago if vampires existed, I would have said the same thing.

I was pretty spun that Grandma said Jessie had killed Colette. He didn't kill her. He couldn't have. Sure, he was a vampire, and they drank human blood to stay alive, but he loved her. There was no doubt in my mind that he loved her. I could more see him taking his own life rather than harming someone he loved so dearly.

But, a small part of my mind whispered, *there are the dreams*. How could I explain those? I'd had some recurring nightmares from childhood, the potential past-life memories

kind. There was one terrifying dream where I was running through the woods, being pursued by a hungry creature that wasn't completely human. Usually I never saw the creature, not clearly. But lately I saw it, right before it lunged to tear out my throat, and in those dreams, it was Jessie.

Nine o'clock on the dot, Jessie came floating out of the sky—falling like a snowflake, drifting onto the roof of our porch, his long coat billowing around him. I was already at the window, fully realizing I looked too eager, but I loved watching him fly.

"Hello," he said, his perfect lips parting into a smile that always caused my heart to hammer wildly in my chest. He closed the gap between us in three steps and settled himself on the roof so we could speak eye to eye. "Did you have a good day? Did the sun shine?"

"Not really," I told him. "Well, I mean, there was a little sun in the afternoon, but I didn't exactly have a good day." After a moment, I added, "It wasn't exactly a terrible day or anything, but... I don't know. We went to see Grandma Gibson, and it was just weird."

"Ah, Lily," Jessie nodded. He knew both Colette and Lily from a brief time when, as girls, they were both maids at the Vanderlind Castle, back when the Vanderlind family first moved to the United States. That's how Colette and Jessie met. "She still struggles with...?" he fumbled for the right words, but settled for touching his temple with his fingertips.

"You could say that." I nodded then took a deep breath before adding, "It's taken kind of a new twist from mistaking me for Colette."

"What kind of twist?" Jessie looked intensely interested. I could have easily gotten lost staring into his beautiful gray eyes and just forgotten all about my crazy great grandmother.

"She thinks she can see the future. She told me not to go to Budapest," I blurted.

"You told her about Budapest?" Jessie jerked back, a little in surprise.

"No," I assured him. "That's the really weird thing. I didn't tell her anything at all. She somehow already knew. I tried to play it off like I was going to see my father, but she saw through that. She didn't exactly know where I was going, but she knew I was planning to go somewhere with you."

"Hmmm..." Jessie's perfect lips made a straight line. "What else did she say?"

I looked down. "Nothing."

"Aurora?" Jessie said in a voice that let me know he also saw through me.

"She said you killed Colette," I said in a small voice. Jessie nodded grimly. "She's right, you know."

"What?" I gasped, my heart immediately in my throat.

"In a way, I did. Not directly, but it's never a good thing for a human to become involved with a vampire. Humans are too fragile. It never ends well."

Shivers ran straight up my spine. "Don't say that."

He shrugged morosely. "It's true."

We sat there for a few minutes, Jessie lost in his thoughts, me wondering about his thoughts. Finally, I broke the silence with, "Do you want to hear about my plan for getting to Budapest?"

"Yes," he said, looking up, his mood brightening.

"It's pretty simple. I just tell my mom that I'm spending Thanksgiving with my dad in Lexington."

Jessie frowned. "Isn't your American Thanksgiving on Thursday?"

"Yeah, but it's either that or wait until Christmas vacation," I told him. "Do you think the Bishops will wait that long?"

“No.” Jessie was adamant. “They would take that long of a delay as an insult.”

“Then I guess we don’t have a choice. I mean, if there are still flights available.” I knew last minute fares were going to be outrageous, but there might actually just not be any empty seats.

“Won’t your mom figure out that you’re lying about visiting your dad? I mean, how is that going to work?” Jessie wanted to know.

“It’ll work,” I assured him. “My mom won’t speak to my dad unless it’s through a lawyer. As long as I play it right, she’ll trust me to arrange everything. If she wants to talk to me while I’m away, she’ll call me on my cell. The only reason she’d call him is if...” I ran out of words.

“If you don’t ever come home,” Jessie filled in for me.

I nodded. “Things are pretty bad between them, so it kind of sucked telling her I wanted to do Thanksgiving with Dad. I know I probably really hurt her, but it’s the best cover story I could think of with so little time.”

Jessie cocked his head to one side, listening. “She’s crying,” he said. “In her bedroom. Not too loudly, but there are a few sobs.”

“Oh, God.” My heart clenched in my chest. “My mom is so the last person on this planet I would ever want to hurt.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” Jessie said, reaching out and squeezing me on the arm. “If there was any other way to make this go away, I would. But Ilona showing up last night made it abundantly clear that we have to get a favorable ruling from the Bishops.”

“And what if we don’t?” I asked. It was, after all, a strong possibility.

Jessie filled his lungs with air and then let it out slowly. “Then we run, and I spend the rest of my life protecting you.”

I couldn’t suppress the words that sprang to my lips. “You mean the rest of my life.”

Jessie looked at me, his gray eyes deep as the night. "Aurora, if a vampire gets to you, it's only because he's already killed me."

Gulping, I whispered, "Do you really think it's that bad?"

"I don't know," he said with a heavy shrug. "But until we get to Budapest, you need to be very careful at night. I don't want you going out after sundown unless you're with a large group of people or I am at your side."

"Okay." I nodded. It wasn't that difficult of a promise to keep. After Ilona, I pretty much didn't want to go out at night ever again.

"And what about your father?" Jessie asked. "What if he agrees to have you for a visit? How will you get out of it?"

"No," I assured him. "He'd never go for it. He doesn't want to see me. He doesn't even want to pay for child support. Whenever I do speak to him, he always manages to work into the conversation how he's broke and can't afford it."

My words made Jessie flinch a little. "I'm sorry your father's priorities are so screwed up," he said, giving my arm a squeeze.

"Yeah, me, too," I told him. "But to be honest with you, I'm pretty used to it."

We sat in silence for a moment, but I could tell Jessie's brain was running a mile a minute. "I'll contact the Bishops and tell them that we'll be there as soon as humanly possible," Jessie said. "They know you must take a plane. I'll also book the tickets and get you a passport. Do you think things will work out with your father? I mean, as far as your mom believing you're going to visit him?"

"I think so," I said, feeling a twinge in my heart knowing I'd made my mother cry. She would never say anything to stop me, of course. Not in a million years. She wasn't the type of parent to prioritize her own feelings over what she thought was healthy for me, but still... I felt like a

jerk. "I'll call my dad again tomorrow. I'm sure he'll say no, but at least there will be the phone records if anyone checks. I'll have to take my car. My mom's expecting me to drive down there, so I guess I can just park it at the airport. I've already asked to take Wednesday off of school to buy us some extra time, and I think my mom will go for it."

"That's good." Jessie nodded his approval. "I'll get you a flight out of Cleveland. That's the closest big airport. How early do you think you can get there on Wednesday?"

"I don't know." I hadn't really thought about it. "Not super early. My mom will find it suspicious if I'm too eager to see my dad," I told him. "But, Jessie. Last minute flights are going to cost a fortune."

"Don't worry about paying for anything," Jessie assured me. "I'll handle it, of course."

"You don't have to," I told him. Although I really couldn't think of any way I could afford a flight to Europe on the wages I earned at Cup of Joe's.

"I insist." His voice was so firm that I didn't resist any further.

"Thank you," I said very softly, leaning a little closer. He was just so generous and kind.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?" Jessie asked after clearing his throat.

"School, I guess. Why?"

"Can you skip Monday and Tuesday?" he wanted to know.

"Absolutely not." Tiburon high was not very lenient on truancy. I would be caught almost immediately. I was already pushing my luck to take Wednesday off even with my mom's permission.

"Do you have to work in the evening?"

"No." I shook my head, wondering if I'd ever told Jessie about my part-time job. "But I'll have to reschedule the weekend." Joe was going to be furious.

“Good. Then I need you to come to see me at sunset. But you have to make sure you arrive before the sun goes down just to be safe.” He put emphasis on the word *before*.

“See you where?” I was confused.

“My home,” he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “We have a lot to go over before we fly.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, somewhat flabbergasted. “You want me to come see you at the castle?”

He gave me a playful smile. “Precisely.”

Jessie and his family lived in a large European castle that they’d had moved brick by brick to America from Hungary right before Hitler started making serious trouble in Europe. We locals were never invited inside the castle, only to the annual garden party the Vanderlinds hosted to keep curiosity down to a minimum. Except for Blossom and me. We’d snuck into the castle during an exclusive party, which was meant only for vampires and their human companions. For better or for worse, that’s how I got tangled up with Jessie in the first place.

“So... I’m just supposed to show up at the gate before sunset?” I asked. His instructions had been perfectly clear, but turning up at the Vanderlind Castle felt like such an odd thing to do that I wanted to clarify that I’d heard what I’d heard.

Jessie nodded. “I’ll tell the guard on gate duty to expect you.”

“Okay,” I agreed, already feeling nervous about the whole thing. “If you think it’s a good idea.”

“I do,” he assured me. “And besides,” Jessie flashed me a shy smile, “I’d like to introduce you to my mother.”

There was nothing I could say that would be at all coherent, so I just nodded at him while my brain was screaming, *Your mother? You want me to meet your mother?*

Gathering his legs under him, Jessie made ready to leave for the night. “I have a lot to do, so I’d better say good night, then.”

“Good night,” I whispered.

He coiled his body in preparation of springing into the air, but then he paused and turned back to me. “You should probably talk to your boyfriend,” he said, his face inscrutable. “Tell him you're going to be away for a few days.” With that he leapt into the air and, in an instant, had disappeared into the night.

Chapter 10

The wind was knocked out of me as if by a blow. I literally felt like someone had socked me in the stomach. It was true; I had a boyfriend, and that boyfriend wasn't Jessie, no matter how wrong it felt. I wanted to be with Jessie. Every fiber of my being yearned to be with him. So why was I dating Fred?

Oh, yeah, because Jessie was a vampire and had disappeared out of my life after telling me that it was too dangerous and we could never be together. He'd left me heartbroken, and Fred had been there, actually wanting to be with me. That was no excuse for dating him when my heart wasn't really into it, but it was how I'd justified it in my head. But that wouldn't work any longer. I wasn't being fair to Fred, and I wasn't being true to myself. It was going to suck, but I had to talk to Fred. I had to explain to him in the gentlest way possible that we couldn't be together.

I climbed into bed dreading the morning.

My dream started in a way that had become familiar—me sneaking out of the house at night. But not exactly our house, not the one Mom and I lived in. This one was bigger with wood floors and a front porch that had a squeaky

screen door. I was in a green and white dress that hit me at mid-calf, and I had something with me—a box or a suitcase; whatever it was, I was carrying something.

I hurried out to the road, my heart pounding with the thrill and terror of leaving. Once I was past a group of large trees, I stopped to take one last look at the house. Tiny bugs and creatures made their night music all around me. There was a lump in my throat, which I swallowed before hurrying down the road, clapping a hat to my head with one hand and toting the suitcase with the other.

Things jumped around, like they do in dreams. Suddenly, I was in the woods, and I was in a panic. My hat was gone and my suitcase along with it. At first, I was urgently trying to find Jessie, but then I became aware of something else in the woods. Something sinister; something hungry; something looking for me. I could hear it sniffing the air. Panic overtook me, and I began to run. Not an intentional sprint to safety but a flight of terror in whatever direction my feet took me as long as it was away from the creature.

My leg got tangled in a root, but this time in the dream, I didn't just trip. It was as if a claw had burst from the ground to grab me by the ankle. I screamed as I fell. A foolish thing to do, but the terror just exploded from my mouth. The creature found me in an instant, plunging through the woods, smiling, gleeful, like a wild dog excited as it closed in for the kill.

And then the worst part. It was always the most horrible part of the dream. The moment when I recognized the bloodthirsty creature, when I realized the beast was my love. The monster was Jessie.

But this time, as Jessie gleefully closed in for the kill, Grandma Gibson sprang from the shadows, flinging herself between us. She was in her long nightgown and robe. Her silver hair was ridiculously long, hanging well past her waist, and was being whipped through the air by a wind that I

hadn't realized was blowing. "Stop!" she commanded, her entire being shimmering with a blue glow.

Jessie was propelled backward like he had been struck in the face by a weighty object. He emitted a high, animal shriek.

"You cannot touch her," my great grandmother said in a powerful voice. "You must leave Aurora alone."

Jessie wasn't really Jessie anymore. He was more like an animal on four legs. I could tell by his eyes that he hated me and wanted nothing more than to end my life, but he couldn't get by Grandma Gibson. His eyes shifted, scanning the area, looking for a way to attack me, a way to elude my grandmother, but she saw this, too. "Leave!" she bellowed, thrusting the palm of her hand toward him, the glow around her becoming more intense.

The beast let out a whimper of pain then turned and ran off into the woods.

I woke up covered in sweat, my alarm clock blaring at me. It had obviously been ringing for quite some time, and I had somehow slept through it. I was late for school.

I had to scramble, forgoing a shower or any type of hair management. I just stuffed my crazed curls into a ponytail, scraped the sleep off my face, and freshened with some lip gloss and a bit of mascara.

Fred showed up at my locker before homeroom looking like a kicked puppy. "I'm sorry I said what I said on Saturday."

"Huh?" I was already flustered and madly grabbing books out of my locker.

"You know." His voice dropped down to a whisper. "About falling in love with you."

My stomach gave a giant lurch. "Oh, Fred. Don't be sorry... I mean, I'm the one that's sorry."

“Yeah,” he said, his head hanging a little. “I kind of figured ‘We need to talk’ was code for you don’t want to date me anymore.”

He looked so miserable that I felt the guilt flooding over me. “I’m going to be late,” I said, glancing at the clock in the hallway. As it was, I was going to have to sprint. “Can we talk at lunch?”

“Okay,” he said. Then, remembering something he had planned, he added, “Yeah, I can’t make lunch. After school?”

Outwardly I said, “Okay,” but inwardly I was thinking, “Crap!” I wanted to wash my hair and get in the right head space for infiltrating the vampire fortress —aka going over to Jessie’s house to meet his mom. The bell rang, and we both started sprinting without another word, already late for homeroom.

Mrs. Stokes gave me the stink eye as I barged into the class while she was taking attendance. I’m not a habitual offender as far as being tardy, so I guess she decided to let it slip by. I gratefully sank into a chair and closed my eyes. I had to think of a way to end things with Fred but without leaving him so scarred for life that he could never say *I love you* to another female.

My brain was a total blank. I did not have much experience dating in general and absolutely no experience as far as breaking up with a guy. I had plenty of experience for being blown off by guys, but that was never in a nice way.

After stressing about it for my first few classes, I decided I needed to consult with an expert. “Hey,” I said to Blossom as we passed each other in the hall. “Want to grab lunch?”

“Can’t. No money,” she told me.

“I’ll buy if you eat light,” I replied.

She brightened, pleased to be offered a free meal; then she grew mildly suspicious. “What’s going on? It’s not my birthday.”

"Yeah, I know, but I need some advice," I explained.
"Boy advice."

"Ooooh." She drew out the word, nodding her head up and down sagely. "You've come to the right woman. But none of this 'eat light' stuff. I'm getting fries." Blossom was blessed with the kind of metabolism where she could eat a bushel of fries and still be slender.

"Fine," I relented. "But it better be good advice."

She gave me a mock indignant look. "Why wouldn't it be?" Then we both had to dash to our next class.

"So, what's up?" Blossom asked as we sat down with our trays of food. We'd opted for fast food seeing that we didn't actually have a ton of time for lunch. My wallet was grateful.

I took a deep breath, dreading actually telling her my problem. "How do you break up with a guy without hurting his feelings?"

Blossom's eyes grew wide. "You're not?" she gasped.

"I am," I replied.

"But why? I thought you were getting along so well. I mean, once he stopped being all sexually entitled and everything."

"Yeah," I had to agree as I unwrapped my burger. "We kind of were, but I just..." I couldn't tell her the truth and had no plausible explanation as to why I wanted to dump Fred. "I'm just not that into him," I ended lamely.

"Well, get into him," she insisted. "He's gorgeous; he's nice to you; he's on the football team; he's not a date rapist. Did it ever occur to you that your standards might be a little too high?"

"I know." I looked glumly down at my burger. I knew before we started that Blossom was going to give me an argument, but hopefully I could get past her objections and score something useful from my lunch-purchasing investment.

"Is it as bad as that?" she asked after I didn't say anything else for a few moments.

"Kind of. I mean, I really like Fred. Just not in the romantic way. So it doesn't feel fair to keep dating him. I mean, I don't want to use him or anything."

"Hmmm..." Blossom mulled the situation over as she munched on a fry.

"Maybe I should just tell him the truth?" I asked. "Or do you think that's too painful?"

"Well." Blossom paused a moment to swallow her food. "If you're going to insist upon being an idiot, then the truth is not the way I would handle it."

"Why not?"

"Because he'll never believe you."

I was confused. "What are you talking about?"

"If I'm hearing you correctly, you're thinking of saying something like, 'It's not you, it's me.' Is that it?"

"Sort of." I hadn't actually thought it out that succinctly, but she had the gist of it.

"Yeah, that'll never work." She shook her head and then took a sip of her drink.

"Why not?" I wanted to know. "It's the truth. Don't guys appreciate being told the truth?"

"When you tell a guy it isn't about him, he's never going to believe you, even if it is the truth."

She had me completely mystified. "Why not?"

"Because guys are trained since birth to think that they are the center of the universe."

"What do you mean?"

She looked a little annoyed at my ignorance. "I mean, every book, every movie, every TV show features guys doing stuff. It's always about them. And even when there is a movie or something that features a woman, it's always about her trying to get noticed by some guy."

I knew Blossom was right, and it started almost from birth. At least for most kids. When I was a little girl, my mom

read me a ton of picture books, but in the books she read to me, it was always the little girl mouse who saved her family or the little girl bear who discovered a pot of gold in the woods. I didn't realize until I was old enough to read on my own that she had substituted all the *hes* with *shes* so that I wouldn't feel passive about being a female. Still, I didn't know what any of this had to do with letting Fred down easy. "What's this got to do with my problem?" I asked her.

"Even if you tell Fred 'It's not about you,' he'll never believe you. He knows it's about him," Blossom explained. "Everything is about him. In Fred's life, he's the star of his own damn movie, so everything is about him."

"Oh." She had a point.

"The fact that you, Aurora, are the star of your own movie never occurs to a guy. You're just a supporting character as far as he's concerned." Blossom harrumphed. "You might be the love interest, but he's the star."

Blossom had obviously been doing some self-help reading or taking time out for some deep, personal reflection or something. This was more insightful than her normal conversations about boys.

"Okay, that's fine. So you're telling me I should tell him...?" I tried to lead her to a few helpful phrases.

"Tell him anything. It doesn't matter. Tell him the truth if it makes you feel better. Make up some crazy lie, if you think that'll be more fun. What I'm saying is that no matter how much you try to explain that you're not that interested in him, he'll somehow change it around in his head so that it's about him."

It might have been true. It sounded pretty true from what I knew about most guys, but still I was having trouble believing it. "Are you sure about that?" I asked her.

"Trust me," Blossom said. "I've broken up with enough guys to know it's a fact."

"So if you were me, you would tell Fred...?" I hedged, trying again to lead her into giving me a direct quote to

guide me through.

Blossom sighed and chewed on the side of her lower lip while she thought about it. "For Fred? I think I'd tell him something romantic. He's on the football team, so he understands competition. I'd say something like 'You're wonderful, but I feel a deep connection to somebody else, so it wouldn't be right for us to stay together. I hope we can still be friends,' or some crap like that."

I had been taking a large gulp from my soda and almost choked when swallowing. Either it was an extremely lucky guess or Blossom was becoming a bit of a psychic.

Chapter 11

“Who is he?” Fred asked. We were sitting in his car in the school parking lot. I had repeated what Blossom had told me almost verbatim, and so far Fred was taking it pretty well.

“No one you know,” I replied quietly. “He doesn’t go here.”

“So, you’re with this guy? You’re together?” he asked, a bit of anger backing the hurt in his voice.

“No, it’s not like that,” I said. “We’re... well...” I wasn’t sure what I actually wanted to reveal. “We can’t be together.”

“Why not?”

“A lot of it has to do with his family,” was the best I could come up with.

“No one in my family has a problem with you,” Fred grumbled.

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. I went with, “I’m sorry.”

“So you’re dumping me for some guy you can’t date?” I didn’t blame him for sounding a bit incredulous.

“I know,” I sighed. “It sounds completely ridiculous to me, too. I mean, you’re so great and understanding and

everything, I feel like I'm making a huge mistake."

"You are making a huge mistake," he said with conviction. "I would never let my family keep us apart."

"It's not that simple," I assured him. But defending my relationship with Jessie wasn't the point of the conversation. I had to give Fred something to make him feel better and then just end it. "You see, even though things are complicated with..." I caught myself before saying Jessie's name. "Even though things are complicated with him, I didn't feel like I was giving our relationship a real chance, and that's not fair to you. I care about you too much to do that to you, so that's why we can't date anymore." In my head I added, *Plus if things don't go well over Thanksgiving, this way it's just your ex-girlfriend that disappeared. Not your girlfriend.* I couldn't say that out loud, of course, but the thought was there.

Fred thought about it for quite a while, his head nodding up and down in little bobs. After two or three minutes, he finally said, "So if it wasn't for this guy, then you'd probably be in love with me?"

"I..." I ran out of words immediately. How could I explain the feelings I had for Jessie? It was impossible when I couldn't even explain them to myself. But still, I shouldn't have tried to date Fred in the first place. That wasn't fair. He wasn't a distraction; he was a person and deserved kindness. I remembered what Blossom had said about Fred. About how he understood competition. He knew all about winning and losing. No one enjoys defeat, but people learn to accept it. "Yes," I told him, leaning in and placing a soft kiss on his cheek. "I'm sure that if I hadn't already given my heart away, it would probably belong to you."

Fred flashed me a small smile. There was a glimmer behind it that I didn't quite understand. "If you love this guy, that's cool," he said. "But he sounds like kind of a tool to me."

"No, he's not," I assured him. Fred had no idea.

“No, I know the type,” he said, fully convinced of it. “And you’re too smart to let some guy treat you bad. At least not for too long.” He gave me a sly smile. “Give me a little time, and I bet I can win you back.”

When I finally got home, I had to scramble. Showering, blow drying my tornado of hair, trying on two dozen different outfits—it all took up time. It’s hard enough meeting the parents of some guy I’m trying to date, but what the heck was I supposed to wear to meet a vampire mom? How do you dress for that? I finally settled on my brown skirt with the white stitching, dark brown tights, Mary Jane-style black flats, a white blouse, and purple cardigan. I looked a little on the wholesome side, but I was hoping Mrs. Vanderlind would like me better for dressing traditionally. I mean, she was over a hundred years old; I wasn’t exactly going to show up bra-less with thong underwear peeking out of the back of my jeans.

The one thing that I thought was going to be a total pain, but was actually surprisingly easy, was googling the time for sunset in Tiburon, Ohio. I figured if I arrived at the Vanderlind Castle a little before 6:30, I would probably be safe but not have to hang around for too long waiting for Jessie to get up.

“Where are you off to?” my mom asked as I grabbed my bag before heading out the door.

I almost said, “Got to work,” but that was an obvious lie because I have to wear a yucky green polo shirt with the Cup of Joe’s logo when I’m working. I was way too spiffed up to say I was heading off to study, so I said, “I’ve got a date,” because it was the only thing that popped into my head.

“Fred?”

“Uh... No. We kind of broke up a little,” I hemmed.

“Sounds like you broke up a lot if you have a date with someone else already.” Mom laughed. “I thought you two were getting along.”

"We were," I told her. "And we still are, but we decided to just be friends."

Mom blinked twice. I could tell she was holding back from peppering me with a million questions. She finally settled on, "Was that your idea or his?"

"Mine," I replied. "He was just getting serious faster than I was, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings."

"And you having a new date right away won't?" She widened her eyes at me.

"No, it's not like that," I said. "It's not exactly a date so much as I wish it was a date."

"I see," Mom said. "Do I need to know his contact info?" My mom was pretty savvy when it came to safety. She didn't pry into my life but always wanted to have a way of contacting the people I was spending time with, especially romantically.

"Not yet," I assured her. "We're meeting in public, and you know, I'll be careful."

"I know, sweetie. Now give me a kiss before you go so that I can still feel a bit like a mom."

"Okay." I restrained myself from rolling my eyes. There was no way my mom was not a mom, but I didn't mind the affection.

"You look nice, by the way," Mom said after I'd pecked her on the cheek and was headed for the door.

Good, I thought. If my mom approved of my outfit then maybe I had a fighting chance with Jessie's mom.

My hopes began to sink as I got closer and closer to the Vanderlind Castle. It didn't matter what I was wearing or how clean I'd washed my hair, I wasn't a vampire. Mrs. Vanderlind wasn't going to like me no matter what because I was not a member of the undead. There was no way around that. And her son was in trouble because of me. I was the one that crashed his party. I was the one that he was protecting when he fought Viktor. I was the one who had

actually staked Viktor, if we were being exact about the details. Fortunately, only Jessie and I knew that.

Pulling my ancient VW Bug up to the tall iron gates of the Vanderlind Castle felt super weird. I was terrified to enter, and I was unable to drive away. There was a guard in a small wooden booth to the left of the gate. He was wearing the dark purple uniform that all the Vanderlind servants wore. I wondered about him. How did he get a job doing security for a vampire family? Did he answer an ad on Craigslist? I knew the Vanderlinds didn't hire locally ever since the disappearance of Colette Gibson, but was the guy from the United States? Was he even human? The sun hadn't quite set, so he probably wasn't a vampire, but was there some other kind of supernatural creature? I was just summoning my courage to say something to the guard when he opened the gate and waved me through. That was probably for the best. I wasn't sure how I would have phrased my question anyway without coming off as totally rude.

While pulling up the gravel drive to the castle, I had to concentrate on keeping the bug on the road. With its massive gray stones looming over me, the castle was pretty intimidating. It looked like it had definitely withstood a siege or two. There were four turrets, one in each corner, and very few windows. At least on the front of the building. I knew for a fact that on the ground floor there was a very large window that faced out the back onto a patio and the Tiburon River. Blossom and I had used it to sneak into a party a few months earlier, and that's how I got tangled up with vampires in the first place.

I'd always been fascinated by the castle, ever since I was a little girl. But so were a lot of people. I mean, there aren't a lot of ancient European castles in North Central Ohio. The fact that my great grandmother and her sister used to work there made the connection to the place even stronger, and the fact that I might have been having a few of

my great, great aunt's memories as dreams really locked it all into place. I was connected to Vanderlind Castle even before I knew that Jessie existed.

There was a bit of a parking area with a town car and a red sports car that looked very fast. I didn't know where to leave my bug but figured behind the town car was a good spot. I hoped that my bug was reasonably concealed from anyone who happened to be on the road driving by. A large percentage of the population of Tiburon knew what kind of car I drove, and I really didn't want to have to explain why it was parked outside a building that nobody local was ever allowed to enter.

I could literally feel my heart pumping in my chest as my shoes crunched along the gravel and I headed for the front door. Vanderlind Castle had a massive wood door for an entrance that probably, at some point in history, had been protected by a portcullis. In an attempt to modernize their home, the Vanderlinds had a smaller, normal-sized door installed in the middle of the massive one. I had just approached the small door and was considering whether I should use the large metal ring suspended from the big door as a knocker or look for a bell when the door was pulled open by the tallest man I'd ever seen.

"Hello, Viggo," I said smiling, relieved to see a familiar face. "How are you?"

"I am wery vell, Miss Aurora. Thank you for asking," was his reply. "Mr. Wanderlind told me to expect you." He opened the door wider and ushered me in.

Viggo had helped me escape the dungeon of the castle with Blossom's unconscious body. I had been dragging her down the tunnel of a secret passage when the giant had come to our aid. He could carry her like she weighed no more than a child. He'd also stood guard to protect me when Viktor was out for my blood and Jessie couldn't be there. Like an idiot, I'd treated him badly, calling the cops to report a strange man lurking in our backyard. I

hadn't known he was there to protect me. I'd thought he was keeping an eye on me so I'd leave Jessie alone.

"Sorry about the other month," I told him. "You know, when I sicced the cops on you."

The large man shrugged. "It was kind of funny when you think about it."

I smiled at him, appreciating a giant with a sense of humor. "Is Jessie up yet?" I asked.

"Not yet, but he will be with you shortly."

The front door opened into a large, beautiful room that I had actually already seen when Blossom and I had snuck into the castle. Unlike the building's facade, the interior of the room was made out of a pale sandstone with tiny flecks of gold sparkling in it. There were two enormous chandeliers suspended from the vaulted ceiling, and they sparkled with hundreds, if not thousands, of cut crystal prisms making tiny rainbows dance across the walls. I'd only seen pictures of the interiors of European castles, and none of them were nearly as bright and cheery. The Vanderlinds had done some modifications over the years to make the living space more comfortable.

The most obvious modification to the castle was the wide, sliding glass door that had been fitted into the back wall of the room, leading out onto a patio and the shores of the Tiburon River. The sun was just sinking below the horizon, so rays of natural light were still pouring into the room. That was until a servant stepped forward and drew closed the massive curtains that covered the glass. The big room was still bright, but the rainbows flitting across the ceiling were instantly dimmed. I felt a brief pang of sadness that Jessie never got to see them.

Standing there looking around, I waited, expecting further instruction from Viggo. When none came, I tried, "Is there someplace I should go to wait, or is it better to just stand here? What am I supposed to do?"

“Colette?” a female voice said behind me causing me to whirl around. There stood a flawless woman who, I had no doubt, was Jessie’s mother; she had his wavy black hair and penetrating gray eyes. She was wearing a deep green silk dress that showed off her sleek frame. “It’s been ages,” she said rushing up to embrace me. “You haven’t changed a bit. Always such the beauty. I would have recognized you anywhere.”

Chapter 12

It's always bizarre when a stranger hugs you; it's made even worse when that stranger is actually a vampire and you catch her taking a deep breath in through her nose. I realized with some shock that Jessie's mom had just sniffed me. Not like a lover might enjoy the intimacy, but like a hungry man smelling a steak. A very loud alarm bell went off in my head. What was I doing there in a house with at least three vampires that I knew of? I hadn't even told anyone where I'd gone. I could disappear without a trace, and the Vanderlinds would never even be suspected. All they'd have to do is ditch my car. Viggo would never say anything. He was too loyal to Jessie. And the guy at the gate would probably never talk. Especially if he knew what was healthy for him. Narcing on a vampire probably doesn't lead to a long life "Uh... I think there's been a little mistake," I told her, trying to politely squirm out of her arms. "I'm not Colette Gibson. Her sister is my great grandmother, Lily."

Jessie's mother gave me a tight smile, breaking our embrace but still holding on to both of my hands. "Don't be absurd," she breathed. "You're Colette Gibson. Did you think I wouldn't recognize you? It hasn't been that many years. My Jessie wouldn't risk his life for anyone less."

“Oh,” I said and then, not being able to think of anything else, snapped my mouth shut. My lips were in danger of trembling. I tried to calm myself. Everything was fine. Of course, Jessie’s mom was in on our deception. She was probably just as eager as Jessie was to have the Bishops believe I was Colette. Her son’s life depended on it.

“What are you doing here?” a familiar male voice demanded. I swung around to see Jessie descending the castle’s wide main staircase. There was an immediate, intense pain in my chest, my brain instantly convinced that I’d somehow misunderstood his invitation and I was not welcome. On second glance, I realized it wasn’t Jessie but his older brother, Daniel, and he wasn’t happy to see me. “Are we going to start letting everyone into the house now? Are traveling salesmen welcome?” he asked no one in particular. Then turning to his mom, he continued with, “Didn’t someone in the family almost get pinched once for taking too much of an interest in the Fuller Brush salesman?”

Daniel was like Jessie in build and deportment but not nearly as beautiful, in my opinion. Where Jessie’s lips were full and smiling, Daniel’s were thin and straight. Where Jessie’s eyes were wide and kind, Daniel’s were narrowed with suspicion, dislike, and distaste. Daniel’s hair was not thick and wavy like his mom’s and his brother’s. He’d been overlooked on that genetic gift. While still black, Daniel’s hair was thin and straight. He wore it slicked back in what I assumed was an attempt to conceal premature balding. Maybe part of his bad mood was having to face eternity with a receding hairline.

It was strange seeing Jessie’s mother and brother standing side by side. They looked exactly the same age, and it wasn’t because his mother had been careful about wearing sun block. It was because after Jessie’s grandfather had been turned into a vampire, he decided that he didn’t want to spend the rest of eternity alone. After each of his children had their twenty-fourth birthday, he turned them

into the undead. If things had gone according to plan, Jessie would have been turned at twenty-four as well. But a scarlet fever epidemic and the senior Vanderlind's own impatience ruined his plans. Jessie would be forever the same age as I was at that exact moment: seventeen.

Mrs. Vanderlind ignored her son's rude behavior. "You remember Colette, don't you?" she said, smiling pleasantly. "You're brother's fiancée?"

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you're going along with this nonsense."

"It's not nonsense to Jessie," she told him. "We love who we love."

"Which, in your case, would be no one," Jessie said, appearing on the stairs. "Or maybe just yourself?"

Glaring at him, Daniel snarled, "You always were the comedian of the family. Maybe that's why the Bishops like you so much. They want a little comic relief."

"They're not so crazy about me anymore," Jessie told him. "That should put a smile on your face."

As a matter of fact, it did cause Daniel to smirk a little, but it made his mother frown. "I'm sure once you speak to them and they meet Colette then all of this nonsense can be cleared away. They can't hold falling in love against you," she said firmly.

Jessie walked over and gave his mother a kiss on the cheek. "I wouldn't hold my breath."

I felt horrible. Did my existence really jeopardize Jessie's position in the vampire community? I knew I would have to ask him about it when we were alone. There were actually a few things we needed to talk about, I thought, remembering Fred.

"Let me introduce you," Jessie said, breaking me out of my fretful thoughts. "Miss Aurora Keys, this is my mother, Alice Vanderlind. Mother, this is Aurora."

"It's nice to meet you," I said, unsure if I should offer to shake hands after she'd just given me a hug.

“But we’ve met before,” Mrs. Vanderlind insisted. “Haven’t we, Colette? I remember it well.”

Jessie gave his mother a mildly amused look. “She goes by Aurora now.”

“Of course, she does,” was the reply. “And why not?”

I really wasn’t sure how I was supposed to jump into the conversation. I had to assume his mother didn’t really think I was Colette Gibson.

Jessie shook his head in a bemused sort of way. “Come on, Aurora,” he said, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. His touch sent a thousand little tingles racing through my arm and down my spine. “We’ve got a lot to work on.”

“Let me know if you need any help,” his mother called after us as Jessie led me away. “Should I send in refreshments?”

“No, thank you, Mom,” Jessie told her.

I had to smile to myself a little, and Jessie noticed my amusement. “What is it?” he wanted to know, giving my hand an extra squeeze. Just having him hold my hand made my anxiety all but disappear.

“Mothers never change,” I told him. “Your mom sounds exactly the way my mom would.”

Jessie smiled back at me, his gray eyes twinkling as he led me down a hallway off of the great room. “And my mom’s been at it for a hundred years. You’d think she’d be over it by now.”

“I wonder if I’ll be like that when I have kids,” I mused.

The twinkle in Jessie’s eyes faded. Just slightly, but I still noticed it. He forced his smile back into place before saying, “I bet you make a wonderful mother.”

I gulped and tried not to lose my smile, either. Vampires couldn’t have children. Not after they were turned. Because Jessie and his brother never had kids and Jessie’s sister was never made a vampire, their family line was effectively at an end. I guess that wasn’t such a big deal

when you could live forever, but it would be weird not to even have the option to have children. That annoying, practical part of my brain whispered to me, *How are you going to have children if you've given your heart to the undead?*

Chapter 13

“So, what am I doing here? What do we need to work on?” I asked as we strolled down a long hallway.

“Well, there’s a bunch of stuff we should go over, but first of all, you need a passport,” he told me, grasping the handle of a carved oak door. There was some kind of medieval scene carved into the wood—a jester entertaining people in a village square. “And for that we need your photograph.” He shoved open the door to reveal a makeshift photo studio. There were a dozen different cameras, lights, and even one of those backdrops that looked like a large piece of paper that models stand in front of during a catalog shoot. “I don’t really know much about photography, so I just ordered a bunch of stuff,” he told me. “I was kind of hoping you knew at least something.” He picked up a camera and peered at it dubiously.

I suppressed a laugh. “Um, yeah... I think I know enough to at least make a passport photo,” I told him, spying an instamatic camera still in the box in the pile of equipment. “I think almost everyone is digital now, but I’m pretty sure this will work, as long as you have film.”

“Film?” Jessie repeated as if it was an alien concept. I began to get the feeling that he had just ordered random

stuff off of the Internet and wasn't even sure how it all went together.

"Here, this should work," I said, spying a small green box that looked like the same packaging as the instamatic camera. "So, is it true about vampires and photographs?" It would have explained his cluelessness.

"It's kind of true," he hedged.

"What does that mean?" I asked as I opened the box and pulled out the camera. It wasn't completely unfamiliar. Blossom's mom had the same model, and one night when I was sleeping over, we girls burned through a bunch of film, which her mother was not happy about.

"It means we don't always appear in a photo, and even when we do, it never lasts," Jessie replied.

"Can we try?" I smiled at him, dropping the square film cartridge into the camera and snapping shut the lid.

Jessie looked slightly taken aback by my question. He obviously wasn't expecting it. "Okay," he said hesitantly, "but you have to promise not to show it to anyone or, you know, post it on the Internet or anything."

It was my turn to be surprised. "Why would I post it on the Internet?" I wanted to know.

"Isn't that what people your age do?" He raised both eyebrows. "I thought it was all about sharing your life in the digital age."

"Yeah, well it's not what I'm all about," I informed him.

"Okay, good," he said, flashing me a smile. "Just don't be disappointed if you don't like the results." I stared at him a moment, not quite sure what he meant, until he nodded at the camera. "Besides, if we're going to take your passport photo, you have to show me what to do."

"Oh, come on," I said, searching the camera for the on button. "I'm sure they had cameras back when you were human."

"True," Jessie had to admit. "But I never had one. And since being turned, there didn't seem much of a point."

“Most cameras these days are super easy,” I told him. “They’re really just point and shoot.” I pressed the button on the instamatic. The camera made a weird whirring noise, and a black square of cardboard popped out. The film was in place and ready to go. Jessie flinched back a little as if he didn’t quite trust the camera. I had to suppress a giggle. “Okay,” I said standing next to him and turning the camera to point at us. “Say cheese.”

“Say what?” He gave me an incredulous look.

“Oh, never mind.” I had no idea where the whole “say cheese” thing had come from. “Just smile.” I pushed the button. The camera’s flash went off. It made that weird moving, grinding sound, and the undeveloped picture slid out the bottom. “That’s about it,” I said, removing the picture.

Jessie squinted at the square. “I told you it wouldn’t work,” he said with a small frown.

“It’s an instamatic,” I informed him. “It takes a minute to develop.”

The square of film slowly came into focus—first me, then the background, and then Jessie. He looked ridiculously handsome, of course, but a little faded, a little fuzzy around the edges like someone had tried to erase him without much success. Looking over my shoulder at the picture, Jessie said, “That’s pretty good. I guess it’s obvious I like you.”

“Huh?” My body was all tingly with him standing so close. It was hard to focus. I didn’t quite understand what he meant.

“A lot of whether a vampire appears in a photograph has to do with the desire to appear,” he explained. “There aren’t a lot of humans out there we can trust.”

I looked at his slightly blurry image in the photo again. “So, you’re saying you mostly trust me but not quite?” I wondered if he would appear clearly in a photograph for Colette. A wave of jealousy flashed over me. But it was

stupid to feel that way over someone who had been dead for several decades.

Jessie chuckled, "This is the best I've ever appeared in a photograph, so I think you should take it as a compliment."

I shrugged, feeling slightly mollified.

"Did you know most spirit photography is vampires?" he asked casually. He loved hitting me with little vampire trivia bombs.

"What?" I tried to remember what spirit photography actually was. "You mean when people see ghosts and orbs and stuff in photographs?"

"Exactly. It's usually vampires. Or frauds doctoring images. And dust particles a lot of the time, I guess. But sometimes it's vampires." After a moment he added, "Arthur Conan Doyle was a big believer in spirit photography. He thought it was all ghosts, of course."

"You mean the guy who wrote Sherlock Holmes?"

"Exactly." Jessie took the camera out of my hands and began looking it over. "He knew there was some truth to it but was so convinced it was the dead that he never considered the undead. That and the fact that most of the photographs he was studying were frauds. Still, he was so convinced, he wrote a book about it."

"Seriously?"

"Sure. *The Case for Spirit Photography*. We've got a copy of it around here somewhere." He shrugged as if everyone had one.

"Wow," I breathed. "What do you think would have happened if he'd figured out the truth?"

Jessie gave a grim smile. "I guess he should be grateful that there was one mystery he couldn't solve. Vampires weren't so concerned about human welfare back then."

"Are they concerned now?" I asked, thinking about Viktor and Ilona.

He considered the question. "I'm not so sure the majority of vampires are as concerned as they are cautious. Three hundred years ago, one vampire could terrorize villagers in the Romanian countryside for decades, and there would be little to no consequence. Today, with the Internet and camera phones and modern technology, if a vampire was caught, I mean, really outed as a blood-drinking member of the undead, word could spread around the world almost instantly."

My little fit of jealousy faded to nothing as I realized how amazing it was that Jessie would trust me with his picture.

"Shall we try this?" Jessie asked, lifting the camera a little. "So, I just aim it at you and push the button?" He did just that as he was talking, and the camera ejected another tiny square of film.

"Yeah, but you have to wait until I'm ready," I told him.

"Why?" he asked, taking another picture. "I have plenty of film."

Boys, even vampire boys, just don't understand the amount of pressure there can be on a girl to look good in a photograph. "Stop that," I scolded, but that only caused him to take another snap.

"Oh, good," he laughed. "That one should show a lot of emotion."

I went to grab the camera, but quick as lightning, he dodged out of my grasp, firing off another shot while he was at it. "This is fun," he said with a laugh.

Ten minutes later, between a lot of goofing around and several blurry photographs, we had the proper photos for a passport picture, as far as I could tell. "I think you apply for a passport through the post office," I said. There was no way the post office processed passport applications overnight. I knew that for sure. But maybe it was a chance for delay. Even the Bishops had to understand that, as a human, I

needed a passport. "We can pull up the forms online if you have a printer."

"Yeah," Jessie said drawing in a breath through his teeth. "It's probably better if we go through less official channels."

"How much less official?" I asked.

He shook his head slightly. "You don't want to know." Then he added with a wink, "But it's a lot faster than the post office."

I waited a few seconds to see if he would add anything to this comment, but he didn't. "What else do we need to work on?" I asked.

Jessie took me by both hands, causing an electric thrill to run up both my arms, through my chest, and deep into my belly. "Dance lessons."

"Dance lessons?" I was surprised. "Really?" It was Monday night, and Thanksgiving was Thursday. It didn't seem like the ideal time to learn how to rhumba. "I thought you were going to instruct me on how to get a corpse through customs or something like that."

"Yeah, well, you'll need to know that, too, but as for right now," he said, pulling me into his arms, "we dance."

His embrace made my breath catch in my throat, but I couldn't keep from laughing. "Will there be much dancing at the tribunal?"

"Well, not at the actual tribunal itself," he said with a grin, "but there will be a ball while we're in Budapest, and I thought you might like to attend."

"A ball?" I stammered. I knew it was probably just Disney brainwashing, but I'd always secretly wanted to attend a ball.

"We don't have to go if you don't want to," Jessie said, misreading my expression.

"No," I insisted. "I want to go. I'd love to go."

"I thought you might." He gave me a sly smile. "That's why I thought we'd sneak in a quick dance lesson. I'm

assuming you don't know how to waltz. I hope that isn't presumptive."

"No." I shook my head. "It's definitely not presumptive." Besides a few ballet classes when I was in grade school, I hadn't had much formal dance training.

It was foolish to spend a few hours dancing when danger was barreling down on us, but Jessie seemed unfazed by wasting the time, and I was thrilled at the thought of spending a few fleeting moments in his arms. And then, to attend a ball. It sounded like something out of a dream.

A sudden flash of insecurity washed over me. "What do you wear to a vampire ball in Budapest?" I asked, wondering if dipping into my college savings was justifiable for some type of gown.

"These affairs are usually pretty elaborate," he said. "Things go in and out of fashion so quickly. Right now, I think it's all about Rococo punk. You know, that nonsense with silk and damask and tricorne hats with feathers. I already drew up a few costume ideas and sent them to my tailor in Budapest. I hope you don't mind. I get so bored at night sometimes with nothing to do."

"No, I don't mind," I said in a small voice. Jessie treated money as if it was of no consequence, and that was the exact opposite of the way I was raised. I was so used to counting pennies and being careful.

"You'll have to get fitted at some point, so that might spoil the surprise, but I hope you'll like what I ordered."

I had to gulp at the thought of Jessie standing there while some seamstress wrapped a measuring tape around my hips. "I'm sure I'll love it," I squeaked.

"Good." He crooked his arm toward me and gave me a smile. "Now, let's go to the music room and find some waltz music. Or maybe we should try the minuet," he said, thinking it over. "I really don't know what people are dancing to these days."

Don't worry about it, I mentally tried to reassure myself as Jessie led me back into the hallway. Just roll with it. When the time comes to dance, if you really feel like you're going to make a fool out of yourself, you can always fake spraining your ankle.

Jessie patted my hand, and I looked up. I must have been wearing a strained look on my face because he gave me a concerned smile and said, "Is everything all right?"

"Oh. Sure," I told him. "It's just... Um... This is embarrassing, but do vampires ever, you know, need to use the bathroom?"

"No," he said, shaking his head.

"Oh." Then there definitely was going to be a problem. I had been too nervous to think about it earlier, but I had to go.

"But we have a few in the castle," he informed me, much to my relief. "For staff and guests."

"Do you get many guests?" I asked, curious about the other humans who got to roam the halls of Vanderlind Castle.

"Not really," he said. "The music room is just at the end of this hallway." He lifted his chin to direct my attention down the passage. Then he changed the direction he was leading me, presumably heading for the facilities. "We rarely have guests at all," he said, reverting to our conversation. "But when we do have visitors, they are vampires mostly, but sometimes they have companions."

I nodded, saying nothing. I wondered if that was what I was destined to become—just another vampire's companion, a portable juice bar.

We crossed the great room again, Jessie pausing outside a door down a short hallway and to the left of the kitchen, which of course, was completely abandoned. "Here we are," he said. "Do you think you can find your way back, or would you rather I wait here?"

The idea of Jessie pacing outside the bathroom door while I tinkled was unappealing. "I can find it," I assured him.

By the time I got into the bathroom and locked the door behind me, my bladder was about to explode. After I had taken care of business and was blissfully relieved, I took in the bathroom's decor. The walls were a round gray stone, a lot like the exterior of the building. I guess because vampires didn't need that type of facility, they didn't bother remodeling it with the beautiful gold-flecked sandstone. The toilet and sink were white porcelain of a traditional, very basic design and sparklingly clean. On the wall above the sink hung an enormous gilt mirror. It was a good six feet long and four feet high. It was so ornate, it looked like something Marie Antoinette might have gazed into at one point in time, although that was only a guess. I had no idea how to put a time period on a mirror. Taken altogether, the bathroom looked like a dungeon with really good amenities.

As I exited the powder room and headed back up the short hallway toward the great hall, I heard voices and thought Jessie was having a conversation with his mother. I slowed my steps, unsure if I would be intruding.

"Are you seriously going to let him go through with this?" a voice demanded. I realized instantly that it was Daniel—not Jessie—talking to his mother.

"I don't see how we have a choice," was Mrs. Vanderlind's reply. "What would you have me do?"

"Just give them the girl," Daniel growled. "That would settle things fast enough."

I froze, scarcely able to breathe. I had to assume that by "the girl" he meant me. He wanted to hand me over to the Bishops.

"I think if she died, it would literally kill your brother," Mrs. Vanderlind said. "We can't let that happen. Not again,"

Daniel laughed—a low, dark laugh full of malice. "Well, she's probably going to get him killed anyway. And how is

that going to make our family look?”

Chapter 14

I stood in the hallway just off the great room, too afraid to move. I figured there was very little preventing Daniel from killing me right then. Besides the disapproval of his mother, of course. A large shadow fell over me. I saw a looming figure out of the corner of my eye and had to stifle a scream. "Do you need assistance, Miss Aurora?" Viggo asked.

"Uh, no," I said hurriedly. "I was just..." I couldn't think what I was "just" doing. "I was just leaving," I said and knew that I meant it.

"If you vill wait for Mr. Wanderlind, he will escort you home."

"No, I can't wait," I told him. "I have to leave now." The castle was huge, but I was suddenly feeling very claustrophobic.

"Shall I show you to your car?" he asked with a slight bow.

"Please," I whispered. To some degree, I trusted Viggo. He was human, and he had protected me before.

"Do you need to speak to Mr. Jessie before you go?" Viggo asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “He already knows I’m leaving,” I lied. I didn’t have my cardigan, but at that point, I didn’t care. I just wanted to get the hell out of the castle as fast as I could.

It was hard to keep my legs from trembling as I headed for the front door with Viggo at my side. Daniel and his mother stared at me. Their expressions let me know that they knew I had heard them. “Good night,” I managed to mumble. “It was nice meeting you.” They said nothing in return, just followed my movements across the room and out the door with their gray, impenetrable eyes.

The problem with knowing vampires exist is that it makes it impossible to fully relax while being outside at night. The walk from the castle to my car was awful. Even with the giant at my side, I kept feeling like some creature was about to dive on me from out of the sky.

Once Viggo had seen me safely into my car, he said in a very somber voice, “You should not be driving alone at night. You should wait for Mr. Wanderlind.”

“I can’t wait,” I told him. “I have to go now.”

“Be careful,” he said. “Especially when you get out of your car.”

“Thanks,” I choked out before locking the doors, stepping on the gas, and chugging toward the gate. Fortunately, the guard had seen me coming, so I didn’t have to wait too long. Once I was through the gate, I jammed on the gas and got the hell out of there.

Driving when you’re scared out of your mind is pretty challenging. I kept thinking I saw menacing creatures soaring through the air or dark shadows darting between the trees. I was being stupid. I knew I was being stupid. I should have waited for Jessie. That would have been the smart thing to do. But my urge to bolt was too strong. I had to get the hell away from Daniel and his plan to sacrifice me to save the family reputation.

When I pulled into the driveway and clicked the garage door opener, I forced myself to scan the garage for a moment to make sure no one was in there waiting for me. I knew a vampire couldn't enter our home without an invitation, but they could have sent someone else. And it was a good policy anyway, even if I wasn't being stalked by the undead.

Pulling into the garage, I waited until the door was fully closed again before I unlocked the car door and got out. I wasn't feeling all that composed, and I knew my mother would probably suspect something was wrong, but I wanted to get the hell into the house.

The first thing I noticed as I scurried inside was a large bouquet of pink roses in a vase on the kitchen table. Did my mom have a new boyfriend that I was unaware of or something? "Hi, Sweetie," she called from the living room where she was reading on the couch.

"Hey, Mom," I called back, trying to make my voice sound normal and not like someone who had just been scared witless. "Who sent the flowers?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "They're for you."

"For me?" I said, mostly to myself. Who the heck would send me flowers? Even with a vampire's lightning speed, there was no way Jessie could have figured out I was gone, found a florist open past nine o'clock at night, and then sped them over to my house before I pulled into the garage. Could he?

My hands fumbled for the card. It simply read

Does he send you flowers?

xo Fred

"Oh, great," I grumbled. Blossom had been right; Fred did enjoy a bit of competition.

“Good flowers or bad flowers?” Mom asked, strolling into the kitchen.

“Huh?” I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“There are only two reasons why most guys send flowers.” She counted them on her fingers. “One, if he’s trying to win you over to liking him. Or two, if he’s screwed up and trying to get you to forgive him.”

“Didn’t Dad get you flowers a lot?” I was pretty small when he’d left, but I did remember there was frequently a vase of flowers around the house.

She sighed a little and said, “I used to hate it when your dad got me flowers. That always meant he’d done something to be a jerk. I mean, how about not being a jerk in the first place? Or maybe getting me flowers just to be nice sometime instead of using them as a tool to buy forgiveness.”

“Nah.” I nudged her in the ribs. “What’s the fun in that?” We both rolled our eyes and had a small giggle.

“So who sent these?” Mom asked, bending over and sniffing one of the blossoms.

“Fred,” I told her.

“He’s trying to win you back?”

I shrugged. “I guess. I really wish he wouldn’t. It makes me feel guilty.”

Mom nodded. “That’s why they do it, sweetie.” Giving our conversation a quick review in her head, she said, “I’m sorry for bagging on your dad. That wasn’t very fair. I’ve just been feeling...” She searched for the right words. “I’ve just been feeling a bit down lately.”

“That’s okay.” I wrapped an arm around her and gave her a half-hug. “I don’t have too many illusions about Dad.”

“Have you heard back from him about Thanksgiving?” she asked, keeping her voice casual.

“Not yet,” I told her. I had meant to call him, but actually forgot.

"It's Monday night," she said with a disapproving frown. "He should let you know so you at least have time to pack."

"I'll call him tomorrow." I added, "Good night, Mom," and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before making a break for the stairs. I had impressed myself with how well I had kept it together.

"How was your not-a-date date?" she called after me.

"Not really a date," I told her over my shoulder as I took the stairs two at a time.

I entered my bedroom with the intention of rushing over to the window and drawing the curtains, but I wasn't fast enough. Jessie was already there. He was standing with his back to the window, head bowed a little, and hands clasped behind him. In one hand, he clutched my purple cardigan.

I'd already flipped the light on, so it was too late for me to slip away. Jessie turned to face me through the glass, his face mortified. "I'm so sorry," he told me. "My mother told me what Daniel said."

"You know he wants to kill me, don't you? He said you should hand me over to the Bishops," I choked out, cowering in the doorway rather than entering the room.

"He's always been an unreasonable jerk. Please don't hold that against me."

"Well, what keeps you from doing it?" I asked. "Why wouldn't you sacrifice me to save your own skin? Daniel said it would get you out of all this trouble and save the family name."

Anguish filled Jessie's eyes, and he slapped his palms against the window. "Because I'd rather die," he said. "Do you understand me? I would rather be locked in a coffin for eternity than let anything happen to you."

He looked so tormented that I found myself crossing to the window without having thought about the consequences. "Is that the truth?"

"Can't you feel that it's the truth?" he asked, his voice almost a whisper.

I reached up and mirrored his hand with mine, my palm against the glass aligned with his. I knew it was foolish, but I did feel it. I felt it intensely. His brother might have been willing to sacrifice me to clear up the trouble with the Bishops, but Jessie never would. "I believe you," I told him, then reached down to open the window.

If I'm being honest, a small, very small, part of my brain was yelling, *Don't do it! This is the same as suicide! He's a vampire. Even if he doesn't kill you, one of his family or friends will. Being with him means being sucked into his world. It will end your life!*

But it was too late; my heart and my hands weren't paying attention to my head. The window swung open, and I was in his arms, tears rolling down my face. "He just really frightened me," I sobbed.

"I hate that he made you cry," Jessie whispered in my hair. "If it wasn't for my mother, I would throw Daniel out the window."

I snuffled a little against his chest. "I don't think that would do much." I had to assume that Daniel could fly as easily as his brother.

"I shouldn't have brought you to the castle," he said. "I just thought it would be easier to get things done. That was my mistake."

"I wanted to go," I insisted as I righted myself, retracting my body back into the house, his arms still supporting me. "I can't stop myself from wanting to find out more about your life. I know it's stupid and dangerous, but I can't help it."

"Well, I'm not going to have Daniel upsetting you. This has got to be scary enough for you as it is without his stupid remarks," Jessie growled.

"What else do we need to go over, then?" I asked. "I mean, I guess we can skip the dance lessons." Saying this

filled me with both relief and disappointment. "And I can probably look up on the Internet how to get a corpse through customs. What else do we need to cover?"

Jessie was now just holding my hand, but even that simple contact left me feeling tingly and warm inside.

"Well," he began, "we should practice being intimate with each other."

"What does that mean?" I asked, feeling simultaneously alarmed and a little aroused.

Jessie ran his fingers through his hair a couple times. "Right now, we know each other, but we don't really know each other," he said. "Not like lovers. We're more like strangers that feel a connection. What the Bishops are expecting is a bona fide couple who are committed to each other. We have to convince them of that."

It was so hard to keep a clear head with his handsome gray eyes looking at me, his lips so close. "Okay." I swallowed hard, my throat feeling suddenly dry. "I broke up with Fred, if that's at all helpful."

Jessie closed his eyes briefly. "Please don't tell me the name of the human you were dating. I am a vampire, after all, and I can have a jealous side."

"It's your own fault," I informed him, mildly alarmed for Fred's welfare. "I was only dating him to try to distract myself from thinking of you. Being angry with him wouldn't be fair. And you're not allowed to be all vampiery about it."

My words caused Jessie to chuckle. "You see, this is the kind of thing we need to be able to do in front of the Bishops. This is good."

"Well, I'm glad you think it's working because all we've got left to get to know each other is a couple of nights. And I have a tendency to get sleepy."

"So you forgive me?" he asked. "For Daniel, I mean?"

"I guess I have to," I replied. "I mean, he is kind of a creep, but lots of people have jerky brothers."

“Good,” Jessie said, a smile breaking across his face, his eyes sparkling. “Would it be okay if I came to visit you tomorrow night?”

“It’s not that late right now,” I told him, glancing over my shoulder at my alarm clock.

“I know, but...” He cleared his throat. “There are some visitors to Tiburon that aren’t very welcome, and I need to make sure they’re aware of my feelings.”

“Oh.” I had assumed the shadows following me home were my imagination, but I suddenly wasn’t so sure. I involuntarily shivered.

“So, tomorrow then? I can come by?”

“Yes,” I told him. My world was spinning way too fast for me to feel that any of my decisions were rational, but agreeing to meet Jessie always felt like the right thing to do.

“I’ll get together all the information you’ll need. Instructions and contacts. That way you won’t have to look it up, and it won’t be in your search history. Plus, you’ll need a death certificate for me and some other papers to get my casket through customs.”

“A death certificate?” I gasped. I hated the idea of Jessie in a wooden box.

“Yes,” he said. “I am, after all, dead.” I must have looked a little shaken because the next thing he said was, “I should probably let you get some sleep.” Taking a half step backward in preparation to leave, he handed me my cardigan then paused. “There is one more thing,” he added, almost shyly.

“What?” I asked. I was still thinking about the death certificate and dreaded the words that were about to come out of his mouth. Jessie did seem to like to make a dramatic exit.

“If we’re going to convince the Bishops that we intend to be conjoined, then I guess I’d better give you this.” He shoved a small velvet box into my hands and then disappeared into the night.

The box was square and fit neatly into my palm. It was the deep hue that I had come to think of as Vanderlind purple. With trembling hands, I flipped open the lid.

There sat the biggest diamond ring I could imagine. I'm no expert in jewelry, but it had to be at least three carats. It was round in shape and about the circumference of a dime. The light from my bedroom got caught up in the stone and made it dance with tiny rainbows. "Oh, my God," I gasped.

The setting was white gold or possibly platinum, I couldn't tell, and there was a channel of smaller diamonds surrounding the center stone. The band of the ring had fine roses and filigree work crafted into the metal. It was so pretty, I just stared at it for a few seconds with my mouth open.

"Are you kidding me with this?" I called out into the night and thought I heard a faint chuckle in response.

Chapter 15

“Hi, Dad, it’s Aurora,” I said, gripping the phone way too hard.

“Aurora?” my dad said, as if he’d never heard the name before.

“Yes, your daughter,” I replied pointedly.

“Oh, hi, honey.” He began to sound a little warmer, like a regular father might. Maybe he just had to repeat my name that way so Tammy wouldn’t immediately pounce on him and pry the phone out of his hands screaming, “Who is it?” I wouldn’t have been surprised if she sat in his office all day while he worked.

I was on lunch at school and had stepped outside to make my phone call. We are not allowed to use our phones inside the school. In fact, if a teacher even sees you with a phone in your hand, it’s reason for confiscation. I’d slipped mine into my bag from my locker and snuck out of the building like I was a shoplifter. Using your phone on school grounds wasn’t strictly prohibited, but not encouraged. I usually just held off until the end of the day, but I wanted to get my dad’s call out of the way.

“Just checking in with you about Thanksgiving,” I said when it became obvious he wasn’t going to take the

conversation there voluntarily.

"Oh," he said. "Yeah... Um... You know I'd love to see you, honey, but Thanksgiving isn't such a great time for you to visit. I mean, well... It's short notice, and... We're really busy right now, and... I'm sorry; it's just not going to work for us."

"I understand," I told him. "Maybe next year." If I was alive to see the next year.

"Oh. Okay. Maybe," he hedged. "Well, we'll talk about it later."

"Okay. I've gotta get going. Bye, Dad," I said and quickly hung up. I found it peculiar that I felt the impulse to say, "I love you," at the end of our conversation. Did I love my dad or did I just feel compelled to say it because he was my dad and that's what you're supposed to say? I didn't really have the room in my brain to figure it out. What I did feel was a level of relief that he actually didn't say yes. That would have complicated things more than they already were. He'd done what I'd expected; he'd said no. Now all I had to do was lie to my mother, fly to Budapest, get a dead body through customs, and convince a tribunal of vampires that I was the reincarnated spirit of my great, great aunt. How hard could that be?

As I slipped my phone into my bag and headed back into the school, I saw Fred waiting for me. I knew it was cowardly, but I'd been avoiding him all morning. He was probably expecting me to be all thrilled and gush over how excited I was that he'd sent me roses, but that's not how I felt. What I felt was slightly annoyed. There was a ton on my plate. I needed to focus on staying alive, not on sparing the feelings of the high school football star. But I also felt guilty. I knew it was such a chick way to feel, but I couldn't help myself. My mom once told me, "If women stopped doing things because they felt guilty, the world would grind to a halt." That was probably true, but it didn't stop me from feeling that way.

"Hi, Fred," I said as I walked inside.

"Hi." He gave me a big expectant smile.

"Thanks for the flowers," I told him as I kept walking.

"You're welcome," he said, keeping pace at my side.

When I didn't add anything to the conversation, he said, "I hope you like pink."

"Sure, I guess," I said, making my way toward the cafeteria. I needed to grab something to eat before facing the afternoon.

"Has your mystery guy ever sent you flowers?" he wanted to know.

I shook my head. "Not yet." He had given me a beautiful necklace and a three carat diamond ring, but it wasn't really fair to bring that up. Jessie had vampire money, and Fred was probably scrounging from his allowance.

Fred thought this over as we walked. When we reached the doors to the cafeteria, he said, "So I guess I have to keep working at it."

"At what?" I was confused.

"Winning you back."

Oh, God, Blossom had been so right. He did really still think it was all about him.

The whole thing made me tired. "Fred, I'm super stressed right now. All I want to do is grab some food and get to my next class."

"Oh," he said, looking deflated.

I felt another wave of guilt wash over me. Fred was nice and cute, and I really should have been dating him instead of being faux engaged to a dead guy. "Thanks again for the flowers," I said, squeezing his arm before I dashed into the cafeteria.

I knew I was giving Fred false hope. The healthiest thing he could have done was get over me and move on with his life, but I just couldn't tell him that. Not with him looking so down. Besides, deep under my attraction for Jessie and my fear of being killed by vampires and the

possibility that I was the reincarnation of some dead relative, I did on some level like Fred. Despite his jock exterior. Or at least, I would have liked him if I'd been living a normal life for a teenager. No such luck with that, though.

I couldn't concentrate. We had a test in history, usually one of my favorite subjects, but I was pretty sure I'd bombed it. I kept thinking of things I needed to pack. Was I really going to go through with it? Was I really going to sneak off to Budapest with a vampire to face a jury of vampires? Was I insane?

I just couldn't think of a way out of it. I couldn't spend the rest of my life leaving the house only during the day. Eventually, I would slip up, and a vampire would get me. The best chance I had was to try to convince the Bishops. It was terrifying to think about—a bad dream I couldn't wake up from. I had to trust Jessie. It was my only option. I had to believe that he would protect me if the Bishops ruled against us. A life spent on the run from vengeful vampires while being protected by a vampire sounded stressful. And here I thought high school was bad.

As soon as I got out of class for the day, my phone was ringing. I noticed as I went to answer it that there were a few messages waiting, all from my mom. And it was her calling again. "Hello? Mom?" I answered, knowing immediately that something must have been very wrong. My mom wouldn't have been peppering me with phone calls otherwise.

"Aurora, it's Grandma Gibson," Mom said, her voice carrying a small tremble. "The nursing home called because she's having a hard time. They need a family member over there right away. I'd go but I've got two counseling sessions this evening, and these girls are both really struggling. I can't cancel on them at the last minute."

"You need me to go over there?" I asked as I headed toward my car. *No, no, no* I shouted in my head. *I don't want to see my crazy great grandmother. I don't want her*

freaking me out even more than I'm already freaked. Not today of all days!

"Would you, honey? Please?" Mom said. "I would really feel a lot better if someone could check on her."

"Of course," I told her, desperately not wanting to go but knowing it was the right thing to do. "I'll go right now." It was the least I could do, even if it meant Grandma Gibson messing with my head. There was a very good chance it would be the last favor I would do for my mom, ever.

"Great," Mom said with a sigh of relief. "Thank you so much, Aurora."

I really did not want to deal with this new, future-predicting great grandmother, but I didn't see how I had a choice. My mom was counting on me. She really loved Grandma Gibson, and I did, too, when she wasn't completely freaking me out. On the way out of town, I stopped by our house and grabbed Fred's roses. They really were pretty and would probably cheer Grandma up a little bit.

"We're so glad you're here," the woman at the front desk said as I went to check in. "Lily has been having a very hard day." After looking at my signature on the sign-in sheet she said, "She keeps asking for Colette. Will she be dropping by, too?"

"Um, no," I had to tell her. "Colette died about eighty years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," the lady said, appearing genuinely concerned. "Well, I'm sure seeing you will cheer her up. Especially bringing such pretty flowers. Aren't you a sweetheart." I wondered how much of a sweetheart she would think I was if she knew I was just ditching flowers from my ex-boyfriend.

When I got to her room, Grandma Gibson looked fine. She was seated at her table, as usual, messing with her cards. "Hi, Grandma," I said, forcing cheerfulness into my voice. "How are you?"

"I am fine, Aurora," she said, looking up from her game of what I had always assumed was solitaire. "I guess the real question is, how are you?"

"Great," I told her. "I brought you some flowers." I lifted the bouquet of roses a little in the air to draw attention to them.

"Thank you," she said, sparing the roses only a small glance. "Ex-boyfriend or creepy guy hoping to be your boyfriend?"

"Wh..." She had caught me out, and I didn't know how to answer.

This made Grandma chuckle. "This isn't my first time around the block," she explained. "I know the only reason people bring nice flowers to the old age home is because they don't want them."

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling genuinely ashamed. "I can give them to the nurses at the front desk if you want."

"No, that's okay, dear. Please don't worry about it. It's the privilege of the old to call out the young. When I have the presence of mind to do it, I like to take advantage of the situation."

I realized, with some surprise, that Grandma Gibson was acting normal. Not just normal, but pretty damn sharp. This never happened when I visited. I sometimes got Sweet Grandma and frequently got Confused Grandma or Agitated Grandma and then there was the new Fortune-Telling Grandma, which I did not appreciate, but rarely Sharp Grandma. Everyone had warned me that she was having a horrible day, but there she was, giving me guilt for recycled flowers. It made me suspicious. "What's going on, Grandma?" I asked, parking myself in the spare chair.

"I had a visit from your young man," she told me quite casually as she flipped over a card and placed it in one of the long rows she'd made.

"Fred?" I was confused.

"No." Grandma shook her head. "That wasn't his name." She pursed her lips. "He looked exactly the way I remembered him. So handsome. I can see how Colette was taken in."

"You mean Jessie?" I asked. There didn't seem to be any point in trying to conceal his name from her. "Jessie visited you here?"

Grandma looked up at me. "Jessie. Yes, that's right. That's his name. Back when I knew him we always addressed him as Mr. Vanderlind, but I suppose things aren't as formal now."

I should have known Grandma Gibson would find a way to make my visit weird. Pinching the bridge of my nose to fight back a headache, I asked, "So you're saying Jessie Vanderlind came here? To visit you? During visiting hours or something?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Aurora," she said, mildly ridiculing me. "Visiting hours end at six. He couldn't have come out then. He came last night. He was there," she said, pointing across the room. "Lurking outside my window."

"He..." I stared at the window for a moment. The curtains were wide open, and the late afternoon light was streaming in. If I were her and I saw a vampire lurking outside my window, I would at least have the curtains drawn. "What did you do?"

"I opened the window and invited him in," she said matter-of-factly as she rearranged a few of her cards.

"You did what?" I couldn't help but exclaim. I trusted Jessie with my life, but he always insisted that I never invite him into my home. He always wanted there to be at least a small barrier between us.

"I told him he was welcome to my blood," Grandma continued, ignoring my outburst. "All that he could drink. But in exchange, he had to leave my great granddaughter alone."

"You... He..." I stammered. "What did you do that for?"

Grandma sighed, giving me a weary look. "Because I'm old. And I've lived with the pain of Colette's death for most of my life. If he were to kill you, like he did my sister, and I was to just keep on living, there wouldn't be any sense in it. I would gladly trade my life for yours if it meant he would go away and leave my family alone."

"He's not like that," I told her.

"Not like what?" was her reply. "Not like a vampire? He doesn't feed off of humans? He doesn't drink blood? He doesn't lure young girls into falling in love with him and then steal their lives?"

"No, he doesn't," I said firmly. "He did fall in love with Colette. But he's not the one that killed her. He couldn't have. He loved her too much. He still loves her."

"Yes, he tried to tell me that, but I wouldn't listen to his lies." There was no getting around her there. She obviously wouldn't listen to anyone.

I wondered how Jessie must have felt seeing Lily Gibson after so long. "What did he say?"

"He said he was sorry. He said there wasn't a day of his life where he didn't think of Colette. At least we have that in common."

"Did he come in here?" I asked, still trying to process what my grandmother had done. "Did he come into your room?"

"No," Grandma told me. "He stayed outside like a gentleman."

"What else did you talk about?" I was still incredulous.

"He told me about his love for Colette and what happened the night she disappeared," Grandma said. "I didn't believe him, of course, but he did a good job of appearing remorseful."

"I think he truly is remorseful," I told her.

Grandma Gibson blew air out from between her lips, making a small sound of disgust. "He's a vampire. He

doesn't know how to feel remorse. Not anymore. He's just imitating the way he used to feel when he was alive."

I wanted to contradict her but knew it wouldn't do any good. "Did you talk about anything else?"

"He told me about you. How he thinks that you're Colette or some such nonsense."

"Well, I do have some of her dreams," I tried to say.

She cut me off with, "I don't believe it for a minute. Shame on him for bewitching a young girl. If he had any human emotions left at all, he would feel ashamed."

"Grandma, it's not like that," I said, reaching out and touching her forearm. She was getting quite worked up, and I wanted to calm her.

"Oh, I know what it's like," she said, a wheeze catching in her voice. "I know he used his good looks and his grief to captivate you. But it's not too late," she told me, coughing a little, her breath getting more ragged. "You don't have to go."

"I do, Grandma," I said, getting to my feet, thinking I should call a nurse or something. "Did he tell you why I have to go?"

"No!" Grandma Gibson practically choked. "You don't have to go. Just wait until he comes to see you tonight," she said, coughing very hard into a hankie she had on the table. I was about to head into the hall to call for some help, but she grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me down to her eye level. "Wait until he's very close to you, then grab a stake and plunge it into his black heart!"

Grandma Gibson let out a sharp gasp and fell forward, the flimsy card table buckling beneath her weight.

"Nurse!" I yelled into the hallway. "I need help! My grandmother's collapsed. She can't breathe! I need help!"

Chapter 16

“Oh, sweetie,” Mom said, wrapping her arms around me.

I started crying. I couldn’t help it. Sometimes you can hold it together until your mom is there, and then you have to cry. “Is Grandma going to be all right?” I asked between sobs.

“I think so, honey. The doctor said she just got over excited,” Mom said, rubbing my back. “What was she talking about that got her so worked up?”

It took me a second to compose my lie. Fortunately, Mom just assumed I was trying to control my emotions. “I think she’s upset that I want to see Dad,” I said, not meeting my mother’s eye. “She was having trouble breathing.”

Mom nodded. “The doctor said she was just hyperventilating.”

After Grandma fell, when I ran out into the hallway screaming, three different nursing home employees came on the run. They got her to lie down, and somebody called emergency services. As Grandma was being wheeled away by the paramedics, I swear I saw her glance in my direction, a look of triumph flashing across her face. But it might have been the light playing tricks or something because she was

really out of it. I followed the ambulance to the hospital, and my mom joined me in the waiting room.

After I'd calmed down, my mom said, "Why don't you head home, honey? I'm sure you haven't had anything to eat, and you probably need to pack."

"Pack?" I looked at her, confused.

"Well, I assume you told your grandmother that your father had said yes and that's why she got so upset."

"Yeah, but I can't go now," I said, waving a hand at our surroundings. "Grandma's in the hospital. What if I go and it kills her?"

Mom gave my shoulder a reassuring pat. "I'll handle your grandmother. She's just being dramatic because she knows that I'm still hurt about your dad. But that's no excuse to send you on a guilt trip."

"I..." I began, feeling absolutely miserable. I was lying to Mom, but Grandma Gibson knew the truth.

"No," Mom said in a firm voice. "If your dad and Tammy are willing to have you, then I really think you should go. I mean, who knows when you'll get this chance again?"

As I drove home, I thought about Grandma Gibson. She was willing to exchange her life for mine. She was willing to cause herself to be hospitalized to stop me. That was sure one determined lady. I wouldn't have been surprised if she managed to die overnight, just so that I'd have to stay in town for the funeral. I was super angry at her but also kind of admired her determination.

By the time I pulled into the garage, it was ten to nine. I was starving. I headed directly to the kitchen and started stuffing leftovers in my mouth straight from the Tupperware out of the fridge. I knew I looked like crap and that Jessie would be touching down on the roof at any minute. Still, I kept eating. Sometimes a girl has to prioritize filling her belly over looking hot for a vampire.

Jessie was already waiting for me by the time I ran upstairs, splashed a little water on my face, and dragged a

brush through my hair. As soon as he saw me, he placed himself directly in front of the window, practically leaning against the glass. "What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

I didn't know what to say to him. I wanted to wrench open the window and fling myself into his arms. But I also wanted to know why the hell he'd gone to visit my Grandma Gibson. If he'd just left her alone then she probably wouldn't have gotten so upset that she had to be hospitalized.

"What did you do after you left here last night?" I asked through the glass, scrutinizing his face for any hint of deception. I had no reason to mistrust him. He'd always been honest with me. But I was upset about Grandma Gibson and ready to cast blame.

Looking down, Jessie said, "I spoke to some vampires who I found in the neighborhood and then..." He ran his hand through his hair a few times. "I went to see Lily."

I appreciated the fact that he didn't lie about it, but I definitely wanted to know, "Why?"

"I didn't mean for her to know I was there," he confessed, his head still low. "I just wanted to see her. To know who she was after all of these years."

"And?" I prodded, unwilling to guide the direction of his words or let him off the hook.

"And she was waiting for me. It was like she knew I was coming," he said, his eyes wide at the memory. "It was too late for me to just disappear into the night, and she was staring at me so fixedly that it only made sense to talk to her."

"What did you say?" I asked.

"It was more what she said." Jessie ran his hand through his hair a few more times and then looked up at me, meeting my eye. "She offered me her life to leave you alone."

I nodded, keeping my gaze steady. He looked so distressed that my impulse was to fling open the window

and wrap my arms around him. But I held strong and just waited for him to keep talking.

"I tried to explain to her that you were in danger and that I only wanted to protect you, but she refused to believe me." He shook his head. "She's a very strong-willed woman."

"Not that strong," I whispered, tears immediately filling my eyes at the memory of Grandma Gibson collapsing to the ground.

"Why? What is it?" he asked.

"She's in the hospital," I told him. "I went to visit her at the home today. She got very upset because of me and ended up having some kind of attack. She couldn't breathe, and the nursing home had to call 911."

"That's horrible." Jessie truly looked grieved by the news. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have gone to see her. I should have been more careful."

I didn't know what to say because he was right, he shouldn't have gone to see her, and he should have been more careful.

"Do you think she's going to be all right?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"The doctors said she would," I replied.

"Do you need to stay here? For Thanksgiving?" Jessie wanted to know. "I can try to delay the Bishops, explain that there is a family emergency. They definitely understand about family."

"Would they be willing to wait until my Christmas break?" I asked. It wasn't too late to try to whip up a good story about being an exchange student.

"No." Jessie shook his head. "The most they'd give us is a few days. They're not *that* understanding."

"My mom said I should go to see my dad anyway and that Grandma will be all right. But if something happened because I left..." I felt my heart clenching at the thought, a huge lump forming in the back of my throat.

Jessie sagged, his legs folding under him. It was as if he was a beach ball and someone had pulled the plug. He ended up in a sitting position on the roof. "When I was alive, I was just a teenager. I felt so strong, so full of life. I felt almost like I was invincible. But humans are so delicate. So easily broken. One day they're young, beautiful girls and then, in the blink of an eye, they become fragile old women. It's frightening," he whispered, wiping at his eyes. "It was so hard seeing her," he went on. "Lily was very pretty, too, you know, when she was a girl. Not as beautiful as Colette, but still young and fresh and vibrant. It just wasn't that long ago..." his words trailed off.

I opened the window and kneeled down to lean on the sill. "What is it?" I asked.

"It's just strange to think that if Colette had lived, she'd be almost the same age as Lily is right now," he admitted. "In my memory, she's so young and vital and pure. I guess I never really pictured her aging before now. Not really." A thought occurred to him. I could see it in his eyes as they shifted in my direction. I could guess what he was thinking.

"You've never thought about me aging either, have you?" I asked.

"No," he admitted. "Not really. It's just such an alien concept to me. I mean, I can't ever see not loving you, but..."

"But it becomes a lot harder when you're still seventeen and I'm seventy-three?" I supplied.

"I'm sorry," he said, appearing truly ashamed. "I guess I should have thought harder about all this eighty years ago when I asked Colette to run away with me."

"It's okay," I told him. "Back then you actually were seventeen. And it's hard to be practical when you're seventeen and in love." I knew that for a fact.

"But I'm not seventeen now," he insisted. "Well, my body is," he said, looking down, still dismayed by it,

apparently. "Pursuing you was the worst thing I ever could have done to you."

"But you didn't pursue me; I pursued you," I reminded him. It was true. I had practically stalked him once I'd escaped, unharmed, from the castle. "And Viktor would have come after me, anyway. It was Blossom and me who snuck into the castle in the first place. You didn't invite us there."

Jessie kept shaking his head back and forth just a little bit in a micro gesture of self condemnation. "I could have handled things differently with him. I'm the one that injured Viktor's pride. He wouldn't have come after you if he didn't want to punish me."

"Does any of this really matter now? I mean—you're to blame; I'm to blame—does it matter?" I asked. It seemed like we were getting distracted from our goal.

"You're right," Jessie said, straightening up. "We need to give our full energy to convincing the Bishops. That should be the only thing we focus on right now."

"Aurora?" my mom's voice called. There was a light tapping at my bedroom door.

"Just a minute, Mom," I called, throwing Jessie a glance and then quietly sliding the window shut. I was just getting up as she opened the door.

"What's going on?" I asked her. "How's Grams doing?"

"Fine, as far as I can tell," she said, coming into my room. "She's just a little disoriented, so they're keeping her overnight for observation."

"Do you think she's going to be okay?" I asked. I really couldn't handle Grandma Gibson dying because of me. I knew she was very old, but I was the one adding stress to her life.

"I don't know," Mom said, sitting on the end of my bed. "I hope so. She's getting up there, so we have to be prepared, no matter what."

I was disappointed to see Mom take a seat. I needed to keep talking to Jessie. I needed to find out what I was

supposed to do for tomorrow. But my mom looked so stressed and tired. I walked over and put my arms around her. "You're a good granddaughter. She knows that."

Mom sniffed. "Thanks, sweetie. And you're a good great granddaughter."

I didn't contradict her. It wasn't the truth, but telling her wouldn't help the situation. "Thanks," I said quietly as I gave her a big squeeze.

Mom stayed in my room talking for about twenty minutes. Mostly, I just listened as she reminisced about Grandma Gibson, who had been a big influence in her life growing up. "I just hate the thought of her not being here," she said at one of her more tearful moments.

I hated the thought of me disappearing on a road trip to see my dad and my mom never knowing why. I was trapped—trapped by knowing Jessie, trapped by loving Jessie. I couldn't think of a way out of my troubles. I had to go to Budapest. That was at the forefront of my mind. I had to go. My only chance of survival was to go and hope we were convincing enough that the Bishops forgave me for being the cause of death of a vampire. It sounded so ludicrous. I wondered if there was a chance that I was actually just going crazy and had somehow made the whole thing up. Should I have been talking to a psychiatrist rather than getting on an airplane?

I wanted to cry. I wanted to confess everything to my mother and have her try to help me figure out what to do. Would she be able to think of something? Would she even believe me?

The answer was no. She wouldn't. She couldn't. The only thing I would accomplish with a confession would be to put her in danger. I had to go face the Bishops and hope for the best.

My mom finally felt a little better and stood up to head for bed. "Do you want me to make sure you're awake tomorrow before I leave for work?" she asked.

“Please,” I told her. “And I need you to call my school and tell them I won’t be there for the day.”

“Okay,” she mumbled as she headed for the door. “Do you have directions and everything? You’re father is definitely expecting you?”

“No, I’m just going to show up on his doorstep and surprise him,” I joked. I actually wasn’t in a joking mood, but it was the kind of thing my mom expected me to say.

Mom rolled her eyes. “Okay. Well, good night then. Talk to you in the morning.”

As soon as Mom closed the door behind her, I darted back over to the window. The porch roof was empty. I waited a few minutes, but Jessie didn’t reappear.

Cracking open the window an inch, I bent down and called “Jessie?” quietly into the night.

My question was met with silence.

I waited, listening. There was a rustling in some nearby trees. The wind was blowing gently, but I caught a snatch of a whispered conversation.

“Is that her?” a voice asked.

“Shhh,” was the reply. “She’ll hear you.”

Chapter 17

I froze, shivers running straight up my spine. There is nothing quite like knowing the undead are outside your house. As I started to close the window as casually as I could muster, I noticed a small dark mound very close to the sill. I cupped my hands around my eyes and pressed them against the glass. The lump appeared to be some kind of satchel.

The trees weren't rustling anymore, but I knew someone was out there, watching me, waiting. Taking a deep breath, I shot my arm out through the small opening in the window, snatched up the bag, and yanked it into the house, shoving the window open just wide enough to wrench the bag in then slamming the window closed and throwing the latch.

Yanking the curtains shut, I hurried over to leap on my bed. It was a childish reaction. A bed offers no more safety than the floor, but I was acting on impulse. I fought back the urge to pull the covers over my head.

The satchel was of a soft, brown leather and the initials J.A.V. were embroidered in a scrolling script on the flap. Jessie must have put it there for me. I wondered why he'd left and if it had anything to do with the voices in the trees.

Suppressing my urge to freak out, I opened the satchel's flap to look inside. The bag had a dark blue silk lining with small gold fleur de lis. It even smelled expensive. It wasn't very heavy, but it was obviously filled up with a few things. The first item I pulled out was a large envelope of papers and a passport. I'd always wanted a passport but figured I'd never have the need for one, so that's what my fingers sought first. I flipped open the small blue book with a federal eagle embossed on the front to see my own image smiling back at me. I felt a small thrill that briefly made me forget that there were at least two vampires outside my window roosting in the trees.

"Let's see here," I said, eager to see my name printed on the page. "Surname: Gibson," I read aloud. "Given name: Colette." I lowered the passport. "What the hell?" I knew Jessie was getting me a fake passport. I mean, there was no way he could have gotten me a legal passport overnight, and he did say he had to fake my age to say I was old enough to travel by myself and with a corpse and everything. I checked the age on the passport. He'd made me twenty-two. I slammed the palm of my hand to my forehead. No one was going to believe I was twenty-two. And of all the names in the world, why had he given me the name of Colette Gibson?

I tried to focus on my breathing and not spin out into a complete panic. After thinking about it for a while, I decided he'd done it because I would respond if somebody said, "Colette?" I might not immediately think they were talking to me, but I would definitely look in their direction. Plus we were trying to convince the Bishops that I was the reincarnation of Colette Gibson, so maybe this was just another point in our favor. "Fine," I grumbled to myself. I wasn't thrilled with being Colette, but I did understand what I assumed was his reasoning.

The papers included a printout of my tickets. I was flying first class, apparently, from Cleveland to Budapest

with two layovers, and it was going to take me... I did a double take. It was going to take me sixteen hours to get there. Sixteen hours! I started feeling my head pulsate with my heartbeat. I literally wasn't going to arrive there until the next day. My flight left Wednesday at noon, and between time changes, layovers, and everything else, I wouldn't arrive in Budapest until sometime Thursday afternoon. "Oh, God," I whispered to myself. Where the hell was Jessie to walk me through all this?

There was a thick, smaller envelope with the packet of papers. I tore it open to find a ridiculous stack of Euros. I had no idea what the conversion rate was, but there were at least twenty-five hundred Euro notes along with a bunch of smaller denominations. I wasn't sure what snacks Jessie thought I'd need during my layovers, but I was definitely covered. There was also about five hundred dollars in U.S. currency. A post-it on the bundle read, "For gas and incidentals." Jessie seemed to have no idea what the minutiae of life cost.

The next piece of paper was a copy of a death certificate. Jessie's death certificate. After taking a few swallows to try to fight down the bile I felt building in my throat, I noted that Jessie was born in 1919. What the hell was happening in the world in 1919? I wracked my brain. There was World War I, I was pretty sure. And maybe some kind of epidemic. Influenza? Was that right?

It was a lot to take in. Jessie, who was hands down the most handsome boy I'd ever seen in real life, was born in 1919 and was, in fact, a corpse.

Along with his death certificate was his passport. Apparently, you need one to travel even after you die. The photo was of an extremely old man and looked nothing like Jessie, but I supposed no one would probably do a comparison with the corpse. There was also a burial permit for Hungary, an embalmer's affidavit, and a letter from the county health office stating that Jessie had no contagious

diseases. I knew there was probably a list of instructions somewhere in the packet, but I began to feel quite queasy and decided to not look at the rest of Jessie's dead person papers for a while.

What was I doing? Nothing rammed home the fact that Jessie was a member of the undead like browsing through his official papers. He was beautiful and perfect and dead. I would keep growing older. I would become wrinkled and wizened and gray, but Jessie would still be beautiful and seventeen.

I decided to focus on packing and not think about anything but small matters like what shoes would be appropriate for the streets of Budapest. Were they cobblestone? Should I pack a pair of heels? These were easier things to think about.

After two hours of piling clothes on my bed and then putting them back in the closet, I felt like I was packed for Budapest. Actually, I didn't feel like I was ready for the trip at all, but it was the best I was going to be able to do with my limited wardrobe. I had two bags. One looked like something I would take to Lexington. That was the one I would let my mom see. And the other I would sneak into the car at some point before heading for the airport.

The last thing I had to pack was my carry-on. My stomach was feeling less queasy, so I thought I could face Jessie's satchel again. Ignoring the pack of disturbing papers, I emptied the rest of the bag onto my bed. There was a guidebook on Hungary, mints, a pack of gum, and an avocado.

The first three things were self evident, but what the heck was up with the avocado? Was there something about vampires and avocados? Nothing came to mind. I warmed up my laptop and entered the two words in Google. There were a couple of vampire fans who went by the name Avocado for some reason, but nothing else really made sense. I tried googling vampires in general and after briefly

hunting around came up with a list of things that were supposed to ward off vampires. There was the usual stuff like garlic and silver, then more obscure items like mustard seeds and hawthorn branches. But absolutely nothing about avocados.

I sat down on my bed to ponder what Jessie was trying to tell me. I had the silver chain of my Pools of Light pendant in my mouth, and I fiddled with the crystal orb. Suddenly, I realized something: the Pools of Light pendant was in silver with a silver chain. Jessie had given it to me. I'd seen him touch it with his own hands. It didn't bother him at all.

What did that mean? Did vampires not have a problem with silver? I'd spent so much time wanting to be near Jessie, even though he was a vampire, that I hadn't asked him much about keeping vampires away. I unclasped the chain to my pendant and looked the whole thing over. There was a small stamp on the clasp of the chain that I thought was the numbers 750. That didn't make any sense to me at all.

I pulled Jessie's photograph and the diamond ring out from where I had tucked them in my underwear drawer. I knew Jessie meant for me to bring the diamond with me to Budapest. We were, after all, pretending to be engaged. I slipped it on my ring finger and marveled at how the stone caught the light from my bedside lamp. My heart felt heavy. It was such a beautiful ring, but it wasn't a real engagement. How would it feel to have him ask me to marry him for real?

I loved Jessie, completely and wholly. There wasn't an ounce of sense in my loving him, but I couldn't help that. And there wasn't a doubt in my mind that Jessie would sacrifice his life to protect me. But what I didn't know was if that was because he loved me, Aurora, or because he believed a part of me was Colette. And how would he feel as I got older and older, wrinkling like a peeled apple left out in the sun?

I sighed, flopping back on my bed. The whole thing hurt too much to think about. And at the moment, I had bigger worries. I lifted up Jessie's photo to look at it. Was it my imagination, or was his image just slightly more faded than it had been when we posed for the photo? I was there still crisp and clear, but Jessie looked more erased; I was sure of it.

I groaned and rolled on my side. It was late; I was tired; there were at least two vampires waiting outside my bedroom window to kill me; and I had an international flight in the morning on a fake passport. I didn't have the time or energy to worry about Jessie's image possibly fading in a photo. I had to get some sleep.

As I lay under the blankets and tried to drift off, my brain kept plaguing me, wondering when the photo had started to fade. Was it when Jessie fully realized that one day I would be an old lady? That would have been my guess.

Chapter 18

I was having a dream. It was one of those situations where I knew it was a dream so I just went along with things, kind of like television but extremely interactive. Lily and I were getting ready for something. We had plans to go out for the evening, and we were primping. We were joking around and fixing each other's hair. Lily was young and pretty. In the dream, it just felt normal, but part of my brain kept thinking, "Wow, that's Grandma Gibson!"

We were going to a dance. That was the best I could figure out. We both had on our best dresses. Mine was green with little white flowers; hers was a pale blue, maybe, with some kind of bow at the neckline.

The doorbell rang, and we were all aflutter, instructing our dad to answer it because we weren't quite ready. Peeking at our dates from the top of the stairs, I saw two young men in dark suits enter the living room, their hair slicked back. One boy held a small box, which probably contained a corsage; the other had a bunch of wildflowers with a ribbon tying them together.

"Lily, Aurora," Dad called, standing at the bottom of the stairs. He knew we were peering down, but he was playing along.

“Aurora?”

The name didn’t feel right, but I knew Dad was calling for me.

“Aurora?” My mom was gently rubbing my arm. “I think you slept through your alarm.”

“Mwaaah?” was initially all I could manage. I cracked open a sleep-sealed eye and looked at my clock. It read 8:37.

“Oh, crud!” I yelped, leaping out of bed. “I’m late!”

“For what?” Mom asked. “Your dad doesn’t have you on a schedule, does he?”

“No,” I stammered, trying to get my bearings. I had to be at the Cleveland airport by ten o’clock, and it was at least a fifty-minute drive if I didn’t hit traffic. “I was just going to stop by work on my way, and also I need to pick up a few things,” my voice trailed off.

“Okay. Well, I’ve got to get to work.” She walked over and gave me a kiss on the head. “Have a good Thanksgiving, and be careful driving down there. No texting.”

“I won’t,” I assured her, madly trying to think of what I had to do before I left.

Mom started heading for the door. “I love you, honey,” she said.

“Mom!” I called after her, a little more urgently than I intended.

“What?” She turned around, slightly startled.

It was possibly the last time I would ever see my mom. There was a good chance I was never coming back from Budapest, and she would never know what had happened. I felt a painful lump in my throat. I dashed up to her and threw my arms around her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Aurora,” she said, returning my squeeze. “Please don’t feel bad or anything silly. I’m happy you get to spend Thanksgiving with your dad. Maybe this means he wants to be more a part of your life.”

After a bit of frantic scrambling, I was on the road and headed for Cleveland by ten after nine. I wasn't showered, and my hair looked like I'd been standing in a strong wind, but I wasn't actually behind schedule. "This is good," I told myself as I accelerated past some cars whose drivers obviously weren't trying to catch a flight. "Everything's fine. This is good."

I made it to the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and pulled into the long-term parking lot just as my cell phone read ten o'clock. I had to grab my bags and get checked in. I knew that. But for some reason, I couldn't get out of the car. In my mind, entering the airport meant I was really doing it; I was flying to Budapest with a corpse in a coffin to face a vampire tribunal. It sounded insane even to me, and I was the one living it.

The minutes were ticking past. I knew I had to get out of the car, but my butt felt glued to the seat. If I stayed in Ohio then eventually vampires would hunt me down and kill me. Jessie, too, for that matter. But going felt like willingly entering the lion's den. I just couldn't make myself do it. I closed my eyes and tried to slow the frantic beating of my heart. *Jessie will protect you*, I whispered to myself. *You have to believe that. No matter what happens at the tribunal, Jessie will protect you.*

A large hand rapped on my driver's side window. "Gah!" I let out a small shriek.

"Are you ready, Miss Aurora?" Viggo asked. He had to practically fold in half to look in at me.

"Viggo!" I exclaimed, leaping out of the car. "Jessie didn't tell me you were coming." I wouldn't be nearly as terrified with Viggo standing next to me.

"No." The giant shook his head. "I cannot go back to Europe. Mr. Wanderlind asked that I make sure everything is okay for you at the airport." He hauled my bags out of the passenger's seat of the bug. "And that I bring his coffin."

“Oh.” I gulped, mentally pushing away images of Jessie lying motionless in a wood box. “Why can’t you go back to Europe?” I shouldn’t have asked. I knew I was probably being rude, but the question was out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

Viggo started walking toward the terminal, both my bags easily tucked under one arm. “It is better for a young girl not to know these kinds of things.”

We walked in silence for a few minutes, me taking three strides for just one of his. “Miss Aurora, may I ask you a small favor?”

I turned my head to look at him, but he didn’t look at me; he kept his eyes facing straight ahead. “Of course,” I told him. Viggo had been very good to me on a couple of occasions. “You could probably ask me a dozen favors.”

He reached into the breast pocket of his charcoal gray suit with his free hand, retrieving a small envelope. “When you arrive in Budapest, will you please give this to my Gloria?”

“Okay,” I said, accepting the envelope. “How do I find your Gloria?”

“She will find you,” he informed me. It sounded a bit menacing, but Viggo was over seven feet tall and had a thick accent—almost everything he said had the potential to sound menacing.

As we entered the actual airport, I asked, “Where is Jessie? I mean, where is his, you know...” I avoided saying the word coffin.

“I have checked him early,” Viggo said. “Maybe he is already on the plane.”

“I thought I was in charge of all that. How did you check him in without me?” It was so weird to be referring to Jessie as if he were a piece of luggage.

The giant glanced in my direction. “I have done this many times before. I have friends here that Mr. Wanderlind

asked me to contact. He thought this way would be easier on you."

"Thank you," I told him. "I'm really glad I don't have to... I mean... This is better and..." I couldn't think of what I wanted to say. "Easier?" It came out more like a question. I rolled my eyes at my own stupidity. "I'm sorry. I'm just nervous. And I'm really glad I don't have to deal with the whole Jessie situation right now. Thank you, Viggo. I really appreciate you being here."

We stepped up to the first class United Airlines counter. There was a long line for coach but no one in front of us for first class. The woman behind the counter gave me a pleasant smile and shot Viggo a nervous glance. "Good afternoon. Where are we headed today?"

Chapter 19

First class really is such a better way to fly. It's cleaner; the passengers are less crabby; the flight attendants actually smile; you don't feel like your back is going to snap in half after the first twenty minutes. The first leg of my trip was Cleveland to Newark. It was less than a two-hour flight, and I felt like I'd barely had enough time to enjoy all the amenities of first class before we landed again. Newark to Munich, Germany, was the brutal leg of the trip. Eight hours of sitting until my butt went numb.

I spent some time browsing through the guidebook. It appeared that Hungarian was a very complicated language more similar to Japanese in construction than to English. The Hungarians also had a song called "Gloomy Sunday" that was so sad that it was banned from being broadcast on the radio because suicides increased whenever it was played. The city had lots of gorgeous buildings that all looked like mansions or castles to me but were apparently just banks and office buildings and stuff. The Danube River divided the city in half, the west bank being Buda and the east bank being Pest. There was a very big castle on the Buda side of the city that I hoped I would get a chance to see, although I doubted it. Arriving on Thursday and leaving on Sunday

didn't leave time for anything beyond dealing with vampires.

Each seat in first class had its own personal television. I had my choice of six different movies plus a ton of different TV programs. I started out watching some comedy that must have been in the theaters for less than a second and ended up watching a program on cloning.

Clones are not the way they are presented in science fiction. Not even close. You are not guaranteed a duplicate of the original organism at all. You can clone a dog with spots and get another dog with spots, but the spots will be completely different, and the dog can act completely differently. A lot has to do with environment apparently. A couple of companies have tried offering pet-cloning services, but they found the public's expectations to be very different than the actual clones. People just wanted their dead pet back and didn't want to have to deal with raising another puppy in the exact same environment as the first one and still not get the same dog. The problem was, you could recreate an organism using the same DNA, but that didn't guarantee you'd get the same personality or appearance. In other words, the same genetics didn't mean the same soul.

I began to think about cloning in terms of reincarnation. Was it similar? I knew I probably didn't have the same DNA as Colette Gibson, but did I have the same soul? Was I just different from her because I was born during a different time period and raised differently and had different experiences?

I knew that there were a ton of people who claimed to be the reincarnation of someone famous like Cleopatra or Napoleon or whoever, but there was only one Cleopatra, so she obviously couldn't be reincarnated into all those people. So maybe each person only got a fraction of Cleopatra's soul. Maybe each time a person dies, her soul can fracture so

that numerous people can be the reincarnation of one person.

I looked like Colette Gibson, and I had some dreams that were supposedly her memories, but I didn't feel like her. It was true I felt connected to Jessie but not to Colette. Not really. Maybe I just got a fraction of Colette's soul and there were other girls out there who would feel the same way if they met Jessie Vanderlind. And how would he feel about them? I felt a flash of jealousy for these hypothetical girls and then had to laugh at myself.

And what about Colette? How would she feel about all of this? It was like that movie, *Sleepless in Seattle*. Tom Hanks feels this great connection with his wife the first time he reaches out and takes her hand, but later she dies. Then, a few years later, he feels the exact same connection with Meg Ryan when he reaches out and takes her hand. Just how many soul mates does the Tom Hanks character get? I knew the movie was supposed to be romantic and my mom really loved it, so I'd seen it a bunch, but I always ended up feeling bad for the first wife. Meg Ryan just sashays in to replace her, like she never existed. Maybe that's how Colette would feel if she knew about Jessie and me. I loved him so much that I could only imagine how devastated Colette would have felt. It made me ache to think about it.

Between the snacking and the entertainment and the comfortable chair, I wasn't as mind-numbingly bored as I'd expected by the time we touched down in Munich. Then I thought I'd have two hours lounging around the airport until my next flight, but it turned out I had to go through security again for some stupid reason, and that soaked up most of my time. Before I knew it, I was back on another plane and headed for Budapest.

I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do once I got off the plane. I had been so focused on deciding *if* I could really follow through with the whole thing that I hadn't devoted much time to thinking *how* I would go

through with the whole thing. Suddenly feeling a surge of panic, I delved back into the stack of papers Jessie had left me. There had to be some kind of instructions. Obviously, he didn't expect me to just wander around the city looking for vampires. And Viggo had said something about a woman name Gloria finding me. Did he mean at the airport? I wish I had asked.

I had been so weirded out by all the documents covering Jessie's embalming and funeral preparations that I had completely overlooked a note directed to me. It was typed and had obviously been printed out on a printer, so that was probably what threw me off. It felt like a note from Jessie should be handwritten.

My Dear Aurora,

I'm including this note in case I don't have an opportunity to give you this information in person before we leave. There are a few of my kind that are being quite stubborn about their stay in Tiburon, and I am trying to keep an eye on them. Please do not go outside after dark.

A woman name Gloria will meet your flight. She will ask you for a letter from Viggo. Please do not go with anyone else. No matter who asks you or what they say. She must be named Gloria and she must ask for a letter from Viggo.

To retrieve my casket, go to the special claims department at baggage claim. It will be heavy so pay a porter to help you clear it through customs. All the documents you need are in this packet. If anyone asks, you are bringing the body of your great grandfather back to Hungary because he wanted to be buried in the place of his birth.

Please don't be nervous and just trust that everything will be all right. You must destroy this note once you have finished reading it.

All of My Love,

J.A.V.

I felt a little numb getting off the plane. It was like I was under water. Everything felt muffled. I had destroyed Jessie's note by tearing it to pieces and flushing it down the first class toilet. He probably typed it instead of doing it by hand because he knew I was a sentimental idiot and would never get rid of something written by him. He was right. It was hard enough tearing the typed note. I read it at least two dozen times before getting out of my seat and then again four or five times in the bathroom. I was only finally able to flush it because I knew there was a line forming outside the door.

Immigration was a bit nerve-wracking. I was prepared to answer that my name was Colette and I was there to bury my great grandfather, but all the guy behind the Plexiglas window asked me was, "Reason for traveling—business or pleasure?"

I replied, "Pleasure," and then tried not to giggle. It just sounded so absurd given the nature of my trip.

I headed to baggage claim. My bags came out of the chute with the first round of luggage—another perk of flying first class. Usually my bag is one of the last ones on the belt. Then I looked for the Special Claims Department. The written Hungarian language did not make any kind of sense to me, but fortunately there were smaller signs in English, and I found the department without much trouble.

I was just walking in the door and wondering what I would say when a man behind the only desk in the room looked up and said, "You are here for the coffin?"

"Yes," I stammered. "How did you know?"

He gave a small shrug as if I looked like the kind of girl who would pick up a coffin from baggage check. "You have the claim ticket?"

"I... uh..." I didn't have the claim ticket. Viggo hadn't given me anything, and I doubted there was anything in the packet that Jessie had left for me. He wouldn't have been able to get it before being checked in. "I have it here somewhere," I told the man, and then I started vigorously rifling through all my papers.

"It is okay. Don't worry," he told me, flapping a hand in my direction in a never-mind gesture. "It's not a problem. I am sure you are not here trying to steal a body."

"Oh, good." I sighed with relief. "I really have no idea what I did with it."

"You will need help for carrying through customs?" he asked. When I told him I did, he picked up the receiver to a phone sitting on his desk and made a call. "A porter will come help you, but he will be a minute." He gestured toward an orange vinyl-covered chair. "Have a seat."

Eventually, a man wearing dirty blue coveralls showed up with a dolly and loaded a large wooden box onto it. I had assumed there would just be the coffin, but apparently it had been packed in pine for extra protection. "Enjoy your visit to Budapest," the man from the Special Claims Department called after me in a cheerful voice. I knew he meant it to be friendly, but it was kind of a strange thing to say to a girl walking behind a coffin.

Besides people staring at me for traveling with a corpse, customs went quite smoothly. I showed all the papers, Jessie's passport, and mine. Both our books got stamped, and we were on our way. I really couldn't believe how easily it all came together.

On the other side of customs, there was a covered, open area that led outside, then a barrier and a gate. A large crowd of people was on the other side of the barrier waiting for arrivals from the various flights to walk through the gate. Behind the crowd was where cars idled while waiting to pick up passengers.

"Aurora," someone called from the crowd. I took a stumbling step, not sure if I should respond to my own name. I was, after all, traveling as Colette.

"Where you go?" asked the man pushing the coffin as he bumped lightly into the back of me with the large pine box.

"Uh... Someone is supposed to pick me up," I explained, although I really didn't know how much English he understood. He just nodded at me, looking impatient.

"Aurora!" I heard the voice again. It was a man's voice, so that wasn't good. "I'm your ride," the voice continued.

I tried to see who was calling to me but couldn't pick the voice out of the crowd. The porter bumped the coffin into the back of me again, shoving me toward the gate. He obviously had places to go and couldn't waste all day helping a girl transport the remains of a loved one. I tried to step to one side, but he was very determined, and I was forced over the threshold into the crowd.

A large, burly man in a black leather jacket and dark shades stepped out of the crowd and grabbed me by the arm. "Let's go. I am your ride," he said in choppy English, his breath reeking of onions.

"No," I said, trying to dig in my heels. "I'm supposed to wait for..."

"Gloria. Yes, I know," he told me, his breath nearly knocking me over. "Gloria could not make it. She is sick. She sent me." He goose stepped me through the sea of people, the porter with the coffin crowding us from behind.

Alarm bells started going off in my head. This wasn't how Jessie wrote that things were going to happen. The

burly man kept yanking me through the crowd. I was barely able to hold onto my luggage. "You have something you're supposed to give me?" he asked.

Okay, that was a little more reassuring. I tried to slow down to reach for the letter. "Yeah, I have a..."

The large man was in no mood to stop and listen. "Just keep quiet and keep moving," he growled.

His telling me to keep quiet really let me know I was in trouble. When a baby is sleeping and someone asks you to keep quiet, you lower your voice, but when someone is dragging you through a crowd toward a car and orders you to keep quiet, that's the time to make a fuss. The burly man obviously wanted to draw as little attention to us as possible. I had the exact opposite plan.

"Leave me alone!" I shouted, seriously digging in my heels. "I don't know you, and I'm not going with you! Leave me alone!"

He tried to clamp his hand over my mouth, but I wasn't tolerating that. I bit down hard until I tasted blood. "You bitch!" he yelled, shoving me away, hard.

I stumbled several steps and went down sharply on one knee. People cleared out of my path, but most of them were trying not to look at me or get involved. I guess no one likes a fuss at the airport.

One woman stepped forward to help me up. "Are you all right?" she asked. She was petite but apparently very strong because she practically hauled me to my feet.

My knee was throbbing, but I said, "I'm fine, but I don't know that man, and he won't leave me alone."

The burly man was tending to his wound and shooting daggers with his eyes in my direction. He was wrapping a handkerchief around his bleeding hand.

"You are Miss Gibson?" the woman asked. "Colette Gibson?"

"Uh... yes."

"I am Gloria," she said with barely a trace of any accent. "You have a letter from Viggo for me?"

"You're Gloria? Then who's that guy?" I jerked my head toward the man. "He said you were sick."

"No, just delayed," she told me. "Probably by his friends. Is that Mr. Vanderlind behind you?" I had to assume she meant Jessie in the box.

"Yes, that's Jessie."

Gloria whistled at the sullen porter who was just standing there as if nothing of interest was going on. She shouted some orders at him in Hungarian and then flipped him a coin, which went spinning right past my head. I couldn't swear to it, but I was pretty sure she'd just tossed him a solid gold Krugerrand. The porter caught the coin, stared at it a second in disbelief, and then answered her something in the affirmative, a broad smile breaking across his face.

Turning to me, Gloria grabbed one of my bags and said, "We have to go. Very quickly. I have a car waiting."

We were too late. The burly man saw what was happening and came lunging toward us, shouting something in Hungarian. I knew we didn't stand a chance if we tried to run. Not without a good head start, at least. The large man was coming straight for me, reaching for something in his breast pocket, which I had to assume was a gun. I stepped decisively forward and struck him in the eye with the palm heel of my hand. It was a solid hit, which he hadn't been expecting. He reeled backwards. While he was unguarded, I kicked him hard, right where it counts. The big man crashed to the ground like a giant redwood, people barely having time to scramble out of his way.

I turned to look at Gloria. She raised both her well-crafted eyebrows. "I'm impressed," she said.

"My mom thinks every girl should know self defense," I told her. "But he's not going to be down for long. Where's your car?"

Chapter 20

Two seconds later, I was in the passenger's seat of a black sports car. I had my bags in my lap. I wasn't going to waste time trying to get them in the trunk. Gloria stomped on the gas, and with a squeal of tires, we were on our way out of the airport.

"Who the hell was that guy?" I asked, twisting in my seat to see what he was doing, but he'd already disappeared into the crowd.

"Mafia, probably," Gloria said with a nonchalant sniff.

"Mafia?" I gulped. "You're kidding."

She shrugged again. "If you wish me to be kidding then I am kidding."

"What the hell does the Mob want with me?"

"I'm sure he is just a paid man. To kill you or kidnap you. There is no reason to worry," she said. I wondered what Gloria considered a good reason to worry.

"Do you think he'll follow us?" I asked, craning my head around the other way to see if there were any suspicious cars behind us.

"Of course, he will follow," she said, as if it didn't matter to her one way or the other. "If he wants to earn his

money, he will follow. But don't worry." A smile broke across her face. "This car is very fast, and I enjoy driving."

As we raced along, I had a better chance to get a look at Gloria. She had straight black hair that was cropped at her chin and a row of thick bangs, also cut straight giving her face a very geometrical shape. Her eyebrows were black and very thin. She was actually quite pretty with delicate features and a Cupid's bow mouth that, instead of being lacquered in dark red like I would have expected, she'd highlighted with a pale pink.

Abruptly pulling off the main road, Gloria drove down a dirt road that ran almost parallel to the one we had just been on. There was nothing but farmland around us and the skeletal remains of an abandoned barn.

She directed the sports car into the mouth of the barn. Once the shadows fell over us, she put the car in park. I really hadn't expected her to stop. "What's going on?" I asked, scrambling at my seatbelt and wondering if I'd put my trust in the wrong person. There was nothing around us but vacant fields. I wouldn't even know where to run.

Gloria lifted a finger in the air to quiet me. She was looking intently out the driver's side window toward the road. We sat there in silence for what must have been close to a minute. Several cars drove past, but none of them caught Gloria's attention. Finally, a black sedan went zipping past at an excessive rate of speed. Nodding to herself, Gloria turned to look at me. "Do you have the letter?" she asked. "The one from Viggo? I would like to read it now."

"Yeah, sure." I dug the envelope out of my carry-on and handed it to her.

Gloria all but snatched the paper out of my hands in an uncontrolled eagerness to read it. She tore the lip of the envelope awkwardly in her zeal to get at its contents. Her mouth moved slightly as she read Viggo's message, as if she was trying to taste every word. I did my best to give her

some privacy by turning slightly away and pretending to look out the car window. I was looking into the black of an abandoned barn, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

I heard Gloria sniff. Then she put the car in drive again and pulled back onto the road, this time at a slower pace. "Thank you," she said in a soft voice after clearing her throat and blinking repeatedly. "This means a lot to me."

"Of course," I told her. It was just carrying a letter. "I can take one back for you, if you like." She gave me a peculiar glance which I quickly interpreted. "I mean," I corrected myself, "if I get to go back."

She nodded, just once.

We passed a few sweet little houses nestled in a grove of trees. It was almost like a picture out of a storybook. I felt a tingle of excitement. I had been so stressed about the coffin and customs and my fake passport and the Mafia that I hadn't really absorbed the fact that I was actually in a foreign country. And not even Canada or Mexico, but Europe—Hungary. I tried to keep myself from pressing my face against the passenger's side window as Gloria drove along. There wasn't a ton to see at that moment, just snatches of houses and a bit of the countryside, but it was Hungarian countryside, so that made it more interesting to me. I thought, with some chagrin, that I would never be able to tell anyone about my adventure, not even Blossom, who was a big fan of adventure in general. Even if I could tell her without risking both our lives plus the safety of Jessie and his family, she would never believe me.

"What happened to Jessie?" I asked, feeling a sudden pang for just abandoning him and making a break for it, even if my life was being threatened.

"He will be taken care of," she informed me. "You will see him when he gets up this evening."

"How do you know Jessie?"

"Mrs. Vanderlind is a close friend of my employer," she told me. "You will be staying at her house while you are in

Budapest.” She pronounced *Budapest* like it was *Budapesht*.

“Who is your employer?” I was almost too intimidated to ask, but I was going to be a guest at her house, so it wasn’t like I was actually prying.

“I am indebted to the Csorbo family, but serve Csorbo Katalin in particular.” The guidebook had explained that Hungarian is the only major European language where they put the surname first and then the given name.

I didn’t know what Gloria meant by indebted. It didn’t sound like a typical employer/employee arrangement. I figured it probably wasn’t the polite thing to dig for details. “Is the Csorbo home in Budapest?” I asked, hoping I had at least come close to pronouncing the name correctly.

“Yes, for many centuries before Buda was even united with Pest.”

The sports car zipped along. We were entering the outskirts of the city. There were charming old houses interspersed with huge concrete apartment buildings that looked like something out of a cold war movie.

“Will you stay with the family much longer?” It seemed very much like she would prefer to be with Viggo.

“Yes,” Gloria said. “I will serve them for my lifetime, and I hope that will be long enough.” Her voice was clipped, and I realized I had probably accidentally trodden on something very personal that I didn’t understand. I also didn’t want to think how she would manage to serve the family after her lifetime. That did not sound fun.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, the scenery turning more urban, the buildings becoming more beautiful, the Soviet look of the facades giving way to numerous architectural flourishes. And then we were on a bridge, crossing the Danube.

Something caught my eye as we approached the bridge. I whipped my head around trying to get a second look. “Are there...” I stammered. “Are there lions on the bridge?”

"Yes," Gloria told me. "Two on each end. This was the first bridge built in Budapest to cross the Danube."

I knew my next question was going to make me sound nuts, but I had to ask. "This might sound weird, but do the lions have tongues?"

Gloria gave a small laugh. "There is a legend in the city that they do not," she said, "but that's only because you can't see them from the ground. My employer has assured me that you can see them from the air."

I found humor in the fact that my great grandmother could freak me out internationally. She was right after all. At least about where I was going. She really could see the future. She knew that I was going to Budapest. And she had warned me not to come.

That was not at all comforting.

"You are amused by the lions?" Gloria asked.

"No." I shook my head a little. "Just thinking about my grandmother."

I thought about Gloria's employer viewing the lions from the air. "Uh..." I began. "Maybe I'm making an assumption here, but the Csorbo family, they're..." I thought of how to phrase it. "They're like the Vanderlinds, right?" I wasn't sure if it was polite to come right out and ask if they were vampires.

Gloria nodded. "They are a very old family."

"And they know about me?" I asked. "They know about Jessie and my situation? They don't have a problem with it?"

The car idled at a traffic light. "They have offered you their protection until the tribunal. But if the Bishops do not rule in your favor, then I am afraid you can expect protection from no one."

"I understand," I told her. If the Bishops wanted me dead, then Jessie and I were on our own. No one would want to risk being dragged down with us.

After a moment, she said, "I would very much like to send a letter home with you for Viggo." I assumed that was

her subtle way of telling me that she hoped the vampires didn't kill me.

The buildings around us became more massive, and the streets became increasingly narrow. I had to assume we were in the heart of Budapest. The roads were cobblestone after all, I noted to myself.

The car paused in front of an iron-gated arch that was the only opening in a long wall of stone. Gloria sat patiently behind the wheel. She did not honk the horn or send out a signal of our arrival in any way that I could observe. After only a moment, two men in beige uniforms appeared and opened the gate.

"Why are they dressed in beige?" I wanted to know. They looked a bit like Hugo Boss was designing suits for UPS.

"It is the livery of the house of Csorbo," she explained. Jessie and his family really lucked out with the dark purple that represented the house of Vanderlind.

"Will Jessie come this way?" I asked. I was growing anxious to know his whereabouts and wanted to keep an eye on the gate.

"He will enter the grounds a different way," Gloria told me as we pulled in. "This entrance is for the living."

Beyond the wall was a rather beautiful building of white stucco with a red-tiled roof. It looked more like how I imagined an Italian villa rather than a medieval castle. "Is this the original building?" I asked. "I mean, has this always been here?"

"Madame Csorbo gets restless, so she hires a new architect every hundred years or so," Gloria explained. "This latest building is from her Italian period."

Chapter 21

“It will be a few hours until the family is up,” Gloria told me as she led me through the villa. It was like something out of an Italian renaissance dream with colorful drapes made of richly embroidered fabrics and parquet floors done in intricate patterns of pale wood that practically glowed they were so well polished. There were lots of pink creamy marble pillars and open-air spaces. The weather was chilly, but the sunlight was streaming in, filling the rooms with life. It made me wonder why Madame Csorbo had a house designed that her family could never fully enjoy.

“Could you check if Jessie’s arrived yet?” I asked. I hated to keep pestering her but wouldn’t be able to relax without knowing if he was safely inside the villa.

“He is resting and will rise with the family,” was the reply, although I didn’t know where she’d received her information. Gloria had led me up a flight of stairs and down a wide hallway that had high, stuccoed ceilings. “This will be your room while you are a guest here,” she said, twisting an ornate golden doorknob and thrusting open a door.

The afternoon sun was streaming into a large room with pale, seashell-pink walls. There was a four-poster bed piled high with pillows in various shades of green. The floor

was red tile, and there were four steps that led up to a small elevated area in front of the windows, which had been supplied with a plush, green loveseat, a small table, and plenty of books. It was the perfect place to while away the hours, enjoying the afternoon sun and looking out across the city.

“Does the Csorbo family frequently have human guests?” I asked.

“Not in the fourteen years that I have been in their service,” Gloria told me.

“But why all these windows and patios and access to sunshine?” I waved a hand at the expansive window stretching across one wall of the room.

Gloria pursed her lips for a moment before saying, “The things you can’t have are frequently the things you crave the most.”

She looked a little sad when saying it, and it made me remember how eager she was to read the letter from Viggo. “Gloria, I know this is none of my business, but why are you here?”

Her eyes showed a flash of anger, but that quickly softened. “My father owed a great deal of money to another family. He had no way to pay them. They were going to take his life. I went to the Csorbos and offered my services if they would pay my father’s debt. We signed a contract, and now I am here.”

“And your father just let you? Did he know who the Csorbos are?” I was stunned.

“I loved my father. I was happy to do it.”

I wondered about her use of the past tense when describing her dad. “And how is your father now? Is he...” I couldn’t think of what to ask. “Is he still happy with your decision?”

“He died two years after I cleared his debt,” Gloria told me. Abruptly turning, she strode toward a door in the opposite wall from the bed. “Here you have your sitting

room," she said, her voice a little ragged, making me wish I hadn't pried into her personal life.

The sitting room also had a wall filled with windows and a sliding door that led out onto a small balcony. In the center of the room was a round table piled high with platters of grapes, plums, figs, and sliced ham. There was a large basket filled with bread and a decanter full of wine, but only one glass.

"There is refreshment, if you are hungry after your flight," Gloria said. "And if you wish to bathe, there is a facility off of your room where you will find everything you need."

That was a relief to know. Vampires frequently forgot certain specific needs of humans. At least Jessie did.

"Perhaps you would like to rest for a while. Your maid's name is Margaret, if you need anything. And Madame Orzy will be in to dress you for this evening," Gloria said.

"Yeah... I've been dressing myself for a while now," I told her. "I appreciate the offer, but I really don't need any help."

"You have brought your own clothing for the ball?" she asked, feigning surprise.

"Oh," I exclaimed. I must have really been stressed for the last few days because I had completely forgotten about the ball. "I guess I will need help, then. Thank you." I felt a little thrill of excitement. I was going to a ball!

"Then I shall leave you," Gloria said. She may have not had much of a discernible accent, but her speech patterns were more formal than mine.

"Thank you, Gloria. And thank you for getting me at the airport," I told her, feeling the urge to give her a hug but sensing it would not be well received.

"Thank you for bringing the letter from my Viggo," she said in turn. "I am still impressed with how you fought that man. It was not quite what I expected from an American teenager."

"Yeah, well, we were lucky," I told her. "He was a big dude, so it was a good thing he wasn't expecting me to fight, either. I had the element of surprise."

After she left, I really intended to have a bit of a snack, spend some time looking out the window at the city, and then explore every element of my rooms. But somehow, the couch was too comfortable, and I found myself cuddled up with a pillow taking an impromptu nap. I'd never had jet lag before, but my urge to sleep was almost overpowering.

I sensed someone was in the room with me, and I woke with a start. "I am sorry, Mademoiselle," said a young woman who looked to be in her early twenties. "I am Margaret, your maid."

"Oh, hi," I coughed. "I'm Au... uh... I'm Colette."

"I did not know you were sleeping. The sun is going down, and I must close the windows. I beg your pardon for disturbing you."

"No, that's fine," I said, sitting up. I felt all bleary and disoriented. "What time is it?"

"It's half past six," she said, unfolding some wooden shutters that clamped over the windows. "Madame Orzy will be in to dress you and style your hair soon if you'd like to refresh yourself before her arrival." Her English was almost as perfect as Gloria's.

"Oh, okay, thanks," I said, hauling myself to my feet.

"And if I may suggest..." Margaret hesitated and I wondered why.

I gave her an encouraging look. "Yes?"

"It is not my place to say, but if I may suggest, you might want to have your supper now before you go down to dinner." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Eating with the family might not be so good for the appetite." She placed her hand on her stomach and gave me a significant look.

I headed to the bathroom, determined to grab a shower before this Madame Orzy person showed up to dress

me. The thought made me giggle, like I was starring in some very polite English period drama.

I felt sticky and stinky from the plane ride and napping in my clothes. I just wanted to scrape off a few layers of scunge. My plans for a quick cleansing went out the window once I saw the tub. It was made out of copper and had ball-in-claw feet. It was long and deep and beckoned me to submerge my body. I definitely complied. The bathroom was fully stocked with whatever bath salt, lotion, luffa, scented candle, and shampoo that I might desire. Fancy balls and vampire tribunals be damned, I was going to take some time out for a leisurely soak.

By the time I wandered back into the sitting room again feeling all pink and refreshed, a woman was waiting for me. The word *prim* immediately sprang to mind when I saw her. Her dress was a dark moss-green velvet, floor length and with a high collar. Her hair was pulled up into a pompadour, and a small hat was perched to one side of her head like a bird in a large nest. I didn't know if what she was wearing was fashionable for Budapest or if she was dressed for the ball. She was sitting very straight in one of the least comfortable-looking chairs in the room. She wore short white gloves, and her hands were folded in her lap. Her expression was quite pinched.

Margaret entered the room, walking up behind me and carrying a tray full of tea things. "Excuse me, Mademoiselle, this is Madame Orzy. She is here to help you with your hair and gown." She put the silver tray down on the table. "Madame Orzy, this is Mademoiselle Colette Gibson."

"It's nice to meet you, Madame Orzy," I said, feeling compelled to break out my American friendliness. "I'm so excited about the ball. I can't wait to see what I'm wearing."

Madame Orzy rose stiffly from her chair, staring at me intently, but not at my eyes. She wasn't even really regarding me as a person—more as an object that she was assessing. An item at an auction house on which she was

considering placing a bid. She turned to Margaret. "I will need a blow dryer, some hot water, and you must stay to help me with zee fitting."

Great, I thought, she hasn't said one word to me, and she already hates my guts.

Finally, Madame Orzy turned to address me. "I think we have zee good basic structure to work with here." I could tell by her accent that she was probably French. She picked up a few strands of my wet hair and examined the ends. "Sometimes you don't know what you get until it's too late and zhere's nothing you can do."

It still didn't feel like she was talking to me as a person, but it was probably the best I was going to get, so I said, "Thank you." Madame Orzy appeared rather startled. She looked at me like I was her pet Pomeranian that had for no reason started to speak.

An hour later, my hair was high on my head, an elaborate pile of curls. My eyebrows had been plucked, my eyelashes curled, my face erased with powder and then painted back on again. And at that exact moment I felt like Scarlet O'Hara in the famous scene from *Gone with the Wind* where her maid is trying to squeeze her into a corset because that was exactly what Madame Orzy was trying to do to me.

"Zhis will not work unless you cooperate," Madame Orzy snapped at me. "You must breathe in." She gave a vicious yank of the cords she was using to bind me into a vivid blue corset.

"I am breathing in," I fired right back at her. I had been trying to suck in my gut for the last ten minutes, and I was really feeling like I was starting to hyperventilate.

"Zhat is it. Hold right zhere!" I was instructed as I assumed Madame Orzy was tying the strings and cinching off all the blood supply to my brain. No wonder women were fainting all the time back then. My waist definitely felt smaller, and my breasts were hiked up so high I felt like I

could easily balance a teacup on my cleavage. I had no idea what I looked like because Madame Orzy refused to dress me in front of a mirror. She wanted to have “zee big reveal,” as she said.

“Bring zee gown,” Madame Orzy commanded, and Margaret went scurrying out of the room.

Chapter 22

This was the moment I had been waiting for, the reason I had tolerated all the plucking and covert snarky remarks from Madame Orzy. She said most of them under her breath and in French, but I knew what she meant.

Margaret came back staggering under the awkward weight of two large garment bags, a hat box, and another strangely shaped bag that reminded me of when people covered their used Christmas trees with plastic and left them out on the lawn for the garbage collector; something inside the bag was sticking out in odd directions.

“Zee panniers,” Madame Orzy said, snapping her fingers at Margaret.

Out of the awkwardly shaped bag, the maid pulled a contraption that looked like a round birdcage that had been cut in half and tied back together at the top with a wide cord. This device was tied around my waist with a half birdcage resting on each hip. Over that went a deep blue silk skirt with a million ruffles down the front. And on top of all of that was a dress in a twinkling silvery blue with a gaping front to show off the ruffles underneath. It had a plunging neckline, and the sleeves were snug until the

elbow where they fanned out into a flutter of fabric that draped off my arms.

“And now,” Madame Orzy said, taking the lid off the hat box with a flourish, “zee pièce de résistance.”

I knew that what she removed from the box was a hat, but it looked exactly like a miniature ship, a galleon under full sail. It was so charming, I wanted to squeal. I couldn’t stop myself from clapping my hands and bouncing up and down in delight. Margaret was grinning, and even Madame Orzy cracked a small smile.

“If you will, please,” Madame Orzy said, lifting up the hat and jerking her chin down, indicating that I should lower my head for her to place the ship.

I did a deep curtsy—it only felt appropriate—and Madame affixed the hat to my puff of hair.

“Zee stockings, zee shoes!” Madame Orzy barked, clapping her hands twice. I had the feeling I should have already been wearing both but she had simply forgot.

Margaret scrambled to get them. Then, kneeling on the floor, she helped me finish dressing while Madame Orzy stood at my side to make sure I kept my balance. The stockings were light blue and felt more like tights than nylons. “Zhey are woven from silk,” I was told by Madame. “Zhey are made zee traditional way like for zee court of Louis Quatorze.” The stockings weren’t held up with garters like we did in modern times, but tied with ribbons and finery at the knee. It seemed the clothing of a few hundred years ago had a lot to do with binding and cutting off circulation.

I wasn’t quite sure what to make of the shoes. They were constructed of a heavy blue fabric, had square heels and a large silver buckle over each tongue. They looked like what I imagined a puritan would wear, if one of the pilgrims was a drag queen. But they fit and were very comfortable, so I had no reason to complain. I had found it amazing that everything fit so completely, but Madame Orzy had assured

me, “Mr. Vanderlind was very specific.” I didn’t even want to begin to think about how Jessie had estimated my size.

And finally, the reveal. The two ladies led me into the bedroom where there was a full-length mirror. They had to teach me how to walk properly in my dress otherwise it started going from side to side like a bell with my legs as the clapper. Getting through the doorway was another challenge, but Madame assured me that the birdcage actually collapsed under pressure and then could be fluffed up again.

The mirror had been covered in a sheet so that I couldn’t catch a glimpse of myself as I approached. Madame Orzy insisted upon sweeping back the sheet herself. “Voila!” she exclaimed as she pulled the fabric away.

In the mirror, I saw a large porcelain doll dressed in a very fancy gown. She looked like the kind of doll I always wanted when I was little but my mom could never afford. My grandmother, Grandma Gibson’s daughter, finally bought me one as a special present, but I was never allowed to play with it. The doll just sat high on a shelf—me staring up at it and it staring down at me, beautiful but too good for my grubby little fingers. I felt a little disoriented looking at the giant doll in the mirror. I went to put a hand to my cheek, and the doll moved too. The doll was me. I stepped forward and laid my palm to the glass. I’ve never been all that excited about looking at myself in the mirror, but even I had to admit I looked beautiful. My skin looked flawless; my hair was tumbling waves on which my galleon hat sailed. The dress took my normally hourglass figure and amplified everything but my waist, which looked almost as slender as my neck. I was so entranced with the costume that I completely forgot anyone else was in the room until Madame Orzy made a little sound in the back of her throat. She was obviously waiting for accolades.

“I love it,” I whispered, a bit overcome. “I feel just like a princess out of a storybook.” I did a slow turn in front of

the mirror so I could see myself from every angle.

"You look just like a princess, too," Margaret told me.

"Yes," Madame Orzy said with an approving nod. "You look very nice. Very nice, indeed."

There was a gentle knock on the door, and Gloria stuck her head in. "Almost ready?" she asked. "Mr. Vanderlind is waiting." Then, doing a double take, she entered the room, one hand pressed against her lips. "Aah!" she sighed. "You look lovely." She came closer to get a better look. "Yes, we will make him stand there a few minutes longer. He will feel it is worth the wait."

But I couldn't stand not being with him any longer. "Jessie is outside?" I asked. It was hard to suppress my urge to make a dash for the door. I couldn't wait for him to see me in my costume. I could never be as gorgeous as he was, but at least for the ball, under the magic hands of Madame Orzy, I was getting close.

"Mr. Vanderlind is waiting at the bottom of the stairs," I was told. I suddenly felt very nervous, but a good kind of nervous, one generated by excitement.

"Do not rush down to him," Madame Orzy told me. "You take your pose at zee top of zee stairs. You give him a chance to admire what a work of art he see before him. You make zee entrance. And zhen you go down."

"Thank you so much, Madame Orzy," I gushed, taking both her hands and giving them a squeeze. "You really are brilliant," I told her.

I was bending down a little to give her a peck on the cheek, but she pulled away. "No, no," she scolded me, waving a finger in the air to ward me off. "You must not forget zee makeup."

"I'm sorry, Madame," I told her, but I could tell she was secretly pleased.

"I should get back to my work," Gloria said, turning to go.

“No,” Madame Orzy insisted. “We will wait here while Mademoiselle Colette makes zee entrance.”

Flashing everyone a nervous smile, I crossed the room and negotiated my giant skirt out the door. “Head up!” Madame Orzy commanded as I entered the hall. “You are making zee entrance, not walking to zee next class in high school.”

She was right. I adjusted my posture accordingly and did my best to glide almost to the top of the stairs. I stopped just out of view of Jessie, putting my hand over my heart and touching my Pools of Light necklace. I wanted to savor this moment. I knew without a doubt that this would be the most glamorous evening of my life, however long that would be, and I wanted to remember it.

Forcing the smile from my face, I tried to garner a more sophisticated expression. I took three steps forward so that I was at the top of the staircase. There, at the bottom of the stairs, was Jessie Vanderlind. He looked so gorgeous, he stole my breath away.

Jessie was looking up toward the stairs expectantly. He was wearing a midnight blue velvet coat that cut away to tails, a blue vest with fabric that matched the ruffles of my skirt, and dark blue pants that had a lighter blue stripe down each leg, which put me in mind of the American Civil War or Han Solo. Black boots, a white shirt with a minimum of frills at the collar, and a jaunty tricorne hat tucked under his arm filled out the look. Dark gloves, a sword at his waist, and his killer good looks completed it. In the period attire, he appeared even more dark and dangerous, like he was ready to fight a duel, rather than like the gentle but brave vampire that I had given my heart to.

Jessie caught sight of me, his gray, flashing eyes raking over my body, and I felt my thighs heating up with desire. Then he ran his hand through his black hair several times, ruffling it from where it had been combed back smooth and even. He spoke, quoting, “Roll on, thou deep

and dark blue Ocean - roll! Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain." With that, Jessie broke into a smile, and I couldn't hold back. I had to smile too. I began to descend the stairs, and he raced up to me, reaching for me. "You look so gorgeous," he said, his arms around my waist. "I knew this design would be stunning on you. I hope you like it."

"I love it," I stammered. "It's the most beautiful thing I could imagine. I feel just like a princess. Thank you so much."

"You know I would do anything for you," he said in a low, almost husky voice.

I looked into his gray eyes and saw the waves of passion there, crashing like a storm in the Atlantic. All of my doubts and fears and silly ideas about cloning evaporated. I couldn't even remember why I had felt so insecure while he was holding me in his arms. I was an idiot; I was a fool; I was in love.

He looked at me again and then frowned. "There is one thing that isn't quite right," he said. "There's something that's just not working."

"What?" I asked, looking down and wondering if he'd somehow gotten a glimpse of my shoes.

He reached up and, with one finger, gently caressed the Pools of Light that I always wore around my neck. "I'm really glad you enjoy the pendant that I gave you, but it doesn't exactly go with your gown." Reaching into his breast pocket he produced a flat, blue velvet box. "I think this might better suit the style." He popped open the lid of the box, and I let out a gasp.

Fanned out on the velvet was the most beautiful necklace I had ever seen. It was quite simple as far as setting, just moonstones bezel set in gold. But each gem glistened like a tear, shimmering, dancing with flashes of rainbow. The first row of moonstones was tight like a dog collar to be secured at the middle of the neck and then the

other stones cascaded down like beading water. It was enchanting. I couldn't stop staring at it.

"It's Lalique," Jessie told me. "By the master, of course."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I could see the word *Lalique* embossed on the inside of the box lid, so I assumed he was some kind of genius jewelry designer from a long time ago. "Jessie," I breathed. "It's so beautiful. It's just too much. I couldn't possibly..."

"Aurora," he said, taking my hand and pressing it to his lips. "If I can't give my fiancée a piece of jewelry now and again, then really, what's the point?"

I instantly wondered if he was concerned that someone was listening. I leaned in close to him and whispered, "I seriously can't take this."

"Yes," he whispered back, just a kiss away from my lips, "you seriously can." Then, plucking the necklace from its box, he said, "Turn around."

Standing on the step above him, we were almost the same height. I dutifully turned around, and he reached for the clasp of my Pools of Light, his fingers brushing along my neck causing small shivers to race up and down my spine. "Here," Jessie said, handing me the pendant to hold while he worked the clasp on the necklace.

While I waited, feeling the coolness of the moonstones on my neck, Margaret came quickly down the stairs. "Shall I take that for you, Mademoiselle?" she asked.

"Please," I told her. "Would you put it in my bag? It's very important to me."

"Of course," she said, reaching for the jewel. As our hands touched, there was an exchange, and she slipped the diamond ring into my hand. It was so large, I still wasn't comfortable wearing it and had accidentally left it on the dressing table.

"Thank you," I mouthed to her. It really would have been bad manners if I showed up to dinner not wearing it.

She had definitely saved me from embarrassment and probably hurting Jessie's feelings. I quickly slipped it on my finger.

"There," Jessie said, securing the clasp. Spinning me around, he leaned back to get a view of my whole ensemble. And then he didn't say anything, just looked.

"Well?" I finally asked him.

"You're always pretty," he told me. "Beautiful, in fact. But tonight you are enchanting." Jessie's eyes were twinkling as he took me in, and I felt my heart throb with pleasure. From somewhere within the house, I heard a gong. "Oh good," Jessie said, turning to head down the stairs and offering me his arm. "It's time for dinner. I haven't eaten since I got up, and I'm absolutely starving."

Chapter 23

I did not want to think about what it meant for my vampire boyfriend to be starving. We were on our way to the dining room, and I was just going to have to deal with whatever was going to happen. I suddenly remembered Margaret's warning to eat before dinner, and I regretted not following her advice. I had grown accustomed to fiddling with my Pools of Light when I was thinking, so my hand automatically sought the pendant and found the moonstones instead. It made me think of something. "Jessie? Can you touch silver?"

He looked over at me, clearly not expecting the question. "What?"

"There's that legend that vampires can't touch silver, but you have no problem with my Pools of Light and it's silver."

"Oh," he said with a laugh. "Okay, you caught me."

"Caught you at what?" I asked. We passed the last step of the staircase, and Jessie led me across the room toward a wide set of doors. I assumed he knew where he was going. I sure didn't.

"Most Pools of Light are set in sterling, but yours is set in platinum," he confessed. "I knew you would be

uncomfortable if I gave you anything too expensive, so I just didn't tell you."

"Jessie," I said in a scolding tone.

He gave a small, guilty shrug.

"But that still doesn't explain..." I was about to ask about vampires and silver, but as we crossed the threshold into the next room, we appeared to be in the company of several vampires, and my words trailed away from my lips.

Everyone had been talking, but as we entered, the room fell silent. We stood there, and I wondered—if I made the wrong move, would they all descend upon me and tear me to pieces?

"Jessie, there you are, my dear boy," a woman said, quickly approaching us. She looked in her forties somewhere. She had on a gown with a skirt that appeared to just be layers and layers of gold tulle. It was beautiful, but looked like something that would be worn by a fanciful little girl pretending to be a fairy; the gown contrasted with her age and made her look older. "And is this your Colette?" she asked, turning to look at me, her eyes wide and blue.

"Yes, Madame Csorbo, may I present Miss Colette Gibson, my fiancée. Colette, this is Madame Csorbo; she is the lady of the house."

"What a darling girl," the vampiress said, taking both my hands and holding them out to my sides to get a better look at me. "I'm not sure I'd be willing to die for you, but still, you are a darling child."

"You have such a lovely home, Madame Csorbo," I told her, not sure if I was supposed to shake hands or curtsy or something. What I really wanted to do was yank my hands out of her grasp and get the hell out of there. The way she was looking me over, I felt like the dinner rather than a dinner guest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw another vampiress approaching Jessie with open familiarity. She was gorgeous, with ash-blond hair piled on her head and festooned with

white ostrich feathers. Her dress was really a state of undress. She was all in white and appeared to be wearing just her undergarments: a white silk corset pushing up her perfect breasts and accentuating her already slender waist, a very frilly pair of bloomers, and full panniers bobbing about over that. Her birdcage was squashed into an oval, rather than bisected, like mine.

The way this half-dressed beauty greeted Jessie, curving her body toward him as they embraced, caused jealousy to flame up within me. Who the hell was she, and why was she pawing my man?

"What do you think of my gown?" Madame Csorbo was asking. "I hate it. Don't you?"

"No, it's beautiful," I told her. "It's like a little girl's dream."

"Yes, but I look dreadful in it." She looked down at all the tulle with distaste. "I had Miss Simone do it, and that was obviously a mistake. I really could have ripped her head off, but it's too late now. I'm just going to have to put up with it." I felt very sorry for Miss Simone, whoever she was.

"Who is that woman talking to Jessie?" I asked. The vampiress in white was touching his chest and leaning toward him to speak more intimately.

"Oh, that's my daughter, Vilma," Madame Csorbo said. "She and Jessie have been friends for half a century." She tugged me a little further away from the other people in the room and fixed me with a steady gaze. "But tell me, my dear girl. You don't really want to spend the rest of your life shackled to a vampire, do you?"

This abrupt change in the conversation was a little surprising. I had been trying to covertly watch Jessie and Vilma, but I was so caught off guard that I turned to look Madame Csorbo in the eye. She was staring at me intently. I felt like a small bird confronted by a snake. "Don't you think it would be easier not to love him?" she asked.

"No," I told her. "I love Jessie more than anything. I can't imagine living without him."

"But surely there are other young men," she suggested. "Human young men who are better suited for you?" Her stare made the back of my head ache a little. I wanted to look away but found that I couldn't.

I knew she wanted me to say yes. She was compelling me to say yes, that I preferred a human boy. But that wasn't how I felt. "No," I managed to spit out from my lips after a bit of struggle. "I've tried dating other boys; I've tried forgetting Jessie but it's not good. I don't know what I would do without him. I love Jessie."

Madame Csorbo let out a trill of laughter and shook her head. "You poor, stupid girl."

That's when Jessie came over, leading Vilma by the hand. "Colette, I want to introduce you to a very good friend of mine."

"I am Vilma. And you are Colette," she said, making it a statement rather than an introduction. "Jessie has told me all about you." I glanced over at Jessie, a little hurt, seeing that he'd said nothing about Vilma to me.

"Well, not everything," he corrected her, trying to give me a reassuring look.

"I know she is human," Vilma said. "I know you killed Viktor to save her. What else do I need to know?"

"Yeah, once you find out my favorite color, then that covers everything," I said, feeling my anger level quickly rising.

Vilma dragged a judgmental eye over my dress. She obviously didn't care for what she saw. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess your favorite color is blue," she snarled. Turning to Jessie, she added, "Human's are so predictable."

"Actually," Jessie said, clearing his throat. "I'm the one that designed her costume. I made some sketches for Madame Orzy. I'm the one that picked the color."

“Oh, I didn’t know,” Vilma said with a quick inhale, sliding her eyes back over my gown, giving it a second appraisal. “It’s lovely. You’re so good at these things. Very talented.” She leaned into him and said in a low, sultry voice, “You really have to take my measurements sometime and design something for me.”

I don’t know how smart it is to try to scratch out the eyes of a vampiress, but I was getting pretty tempted. I think Madame Csorbo sensed what I was thinking because she interjected herself between Jessie and her daughter saying, “Come, my dear boy, let us introduce your lovely fiancée to the room.” She ushered the two of us toward the other vampires, leaving Vilma to make a sour face.

I was introduced to everyone but remembered no one’s name. Servants were passing through the room with goblets of what I had to assume was blood. Others served hors d'oeuvres of what looked like miniature kidneys skewered with toothpicks. The vampires were eagerly popping the organs in their mouths and sucking out all the juices then spitting the remains discretely into lace napkins. I tried not to shudder thinking of what creatures had provided such delicacies. Jessie did drink, but refrained from sampling any of these chewy treats, for which I was deeply grateful.

It was very unnerving being in a room full of vampires. Everyone kept looking at me intensely with their crazy vampire eyes and asking me very personal questions about my relationship with Jessie. I wanted to tell them all to go to hell, but I felt compelled to answer them every time when they stared at me with their magnetic eyes. It was irritating to the extreme, and I was just about to start clawing the walls when we were seated for dinner.

I was not seated anywhere near Jessie at the table. Madame Csorbo was at the head, and I was to her right, which I was pretty sure was an honor, but maybe she just wanted to keep an eye on me. The table was set for an

elaborate meal with lots of forks and glassware and dishes. My stomach began to feel queasy as I dreaded watching the vampires eat. Numerous servants appeared, all dressed in their beige livery, carrying covered silver trays. I wondered if the serving pieces were actually silver or if they were all platinum or something crazy like that. I still didn't know for sure if vampires had silver allergies. They sure did like the color, though.

Much to my surprise, the lead servant approached me first, pulling the lid off of a huge dish of pears and chicken. The vampires all stopped chatting to each other and observed me serving myself with the attention of medical students watching an intricate operation. "Thank you," I said, after using the serving pieces he offered me to place a small bit of food on my plate.

I expected the servant to then proceed to Madame Csorbo and make his way around the table, but instead he headed out of the room. The next servant pulled the lid off his tray and offered me more food. The vampires all watched, eagerly, the ones at the far end of the table even stretching their necks to see what I would do. Aware of the long row of servants waiting to offer me various delicacies, I took an even smaller portion than I had from the first servant. This caused a bit of whispering among the vampires.

"Do you not care for broccoli Florentine?" Madame Csorbo asked. "I was so hoping you'd have some. It was one of my favorite dishes when I was a human."

"No, it's not that," I said. "I'm sure it's delicious." I waved toward the long line of men with trays. "It's just that there's so much food."

"But you are going to save room for dessert," a portly man called from the far end of the table. "There's going to be baked Alaska, and you wouldn't want to miss that."

"There's lobster for the main course," a vampiress with an ample bosom told me. "I'm sure you'll want some of

that.”

“Lobster is just one of the main courses,” Madame Csorbo corrected her. “There is also beef wellington. I’m sure that’s something you’d like to eat.”

I had no idea what was going on. They all seemed so tense and eager. I helped myself to a modest portion from the third tray. “For the love of God, please taste something,” the vampire to my right said. He was wearing a military style coat full of medals, and I was pretty sure he had been introduced to me as a duke. “We’re all waiting.”

I cut a small piece of the broccoli, knowing the lady of the house particularly liked the dish, and placed it in my mouth.

“Describe it please,” the Duke said. I saw that both his hands were tightly clutching the table edge. “No detail is too small.”

Chapter 24

Two hours later, I was bursting from my corset. I had tasted and described my way through every dish that was presented to me. The vampires gave me their rapt attention, calling out for me to take a second bite of a dish that had been their particular favorite. Some of them were even taking notes on my reactions. They all appeared quite excited by the experience. Only Jessie and Vilma viewed my meal with any type of reserve. Jessie nodded and smiled in my direction, sometimes encouraging me with, "Don't eat any more if you don't want to," only to be shouted down by the other vampires. Vilma sulked at the far end of the table, yawning and rolling her eyes.

At the end of the meal, the Duke cried out, "And now for the port!" but I simply had to refuse. I had managed my way through numerous dishes, without staining my gown, and I just wasn't willing to indulge them anymore. I was excessively grateful that I had forgotten to follow Margaret's instructions to fill up before the meal. That would have been awful; the vampires would have been so disappointed.

I felt ridiculously full and incredibly drowsy, but there was no way I could lie down in my elaborate costume. And getting out of it and back in again would leave me looking

mussed. Still, my head began to bob, and I just couldn't seem to keep my eyes open, which is saying something in a room filled with the undead.

"My dear," I heard Madame Csorbo and felt her hand on my shoulder. "We shouldn't have pressed you so hard to eat. But thank you so much. I had promised my guests, and I do appreciate you making them happy."

"Of course," I murmured. "Thank you for letting me stay here."

"Come with me, my girl," she said, taking me by the hand and leading me from the room. We crossed over to a large sitting room and beyond that a smaller room with just a few chairs and loveseats piled with pillows. "Sit here," she said, clearing some pillows off a loveseat. When I was about to protest about my dress she said, "Don't worry. You're not my first guest to overeat."

I followed her command, too drowsy to be alarmed by the thought of what her guests usually gorged on. Madame tucked a pillow behind the small of my back and then placed a tall, rather firm pillow in my lap. "You can lean forward and balance your chin on the pillow like a wedge," she instructed me. "This way you won't crumple your dress or flatten your hair."

I tried it, and it worked remarkably well. "Thank you," I mumbled. "I just need to close my eyes for a moment."

"That's fine, my girl. Take all the time you need," she told me. "I'll send the maid in an hour to spruce you up and have her bring some..." She paused, muttering to herself. "Oh, what is it you humans drink to wake up? I'm getting so forgetful this century." Then she thought of it. "Coffee! I'll have the maid come in with some coffee."

The next thing I knew, Margaret was wheeling in a cart with coffee and cakes. "Mademoiselle Colette, are you awake?" she asked in a soft voice.

I coughed, jerking up from where I had slumped over on the pillow. "What time is it?" I asked.

“Nearly midnight,” she told me. Then, seeing my alarmed face, she said, “Don’t worry. The ball has just started. And the Csorbos prefer to be fashionably late.”

“Oh, okay, good,” I said, relaxing back onto the cushion.

“Shall I pour you some coffee?” Margaret asked.

“Please,” I told her. “But are they kidding with the cake? They just about killed me with how much food they made me eat at dinner.”

“I’m so sorry I told you to eat something before the meal,” she said as she filled a bone china coffee cup. “It’s just... It’s just that’s not the way they usually eat when they don’t have a human guest.”

“I can imagine,” I said, gratefully reaching for the coffee. It was not my favorite taste, but I loved the smell, and I needed the caffeine.

As I drank a second and third serving from the dainty cup, Margaret buzzed around me like a bumblebee, fluffing my hair, powdering my nose, reapplying my lipstick, and straightening my gown. “Good as new,” she said as she finished up.

There was a knock on the door, and Jessie stuck his head in. “About ready for the ball, princess?” he asked.

I couldn’t help but giggle. I felt delightfully refreshed, caffeinated, and ready to go. Jessie crooked his elbow in my direction, and I hurried over to link my arm with his. “Have a wonderful night,” Margaret whispered as I sailed past.

The opening Gloria and I had used to enter the villa was not the main entrance. It was grand and it was beautiful, but it paled in comparison to the enormous door that Jessie led me out onto an expansive porch. The vampires were all outside, still discussing the ridiculous meal they had made me eat. A few of them smiled at me in a friendly way. I guess they felt like I had done them a favor somehow, and they were appreciative.

"You have no cloak?" Madame Csorbo asked, shooting Jessie a look of censure. "You'll catch cold. Vampires never think of these things."

"I'm afraid I just forgot," Jessie admitted, a bit shame faced.

The vampiress snapped her fingers at one of the servants waiting outside. "Bring my opera cloak," she instructed him. "Quickly. The coaches are almost here."

"Coaches?" I turned to look at my escort, who had not felt the need to clue me in about anything apparently.

"It's popular to arrive at a ball in a carriage," he said with a small shrug.

"Um... doesn't that kind of attract the attention of the local Budapest population?" The Vanderlinds always tried to keep a low profile back in Ohio.

"But it keeps so many people employed," he replied. "Groomsmen, wheelwrights, blacksmiths; the Csorbos are keeping craftsmanship alive. Plus," he added after a moment, "they rent the carriages out for movies and parades and things. If people benefit enough then they usually turn a blind eye to any strange behaviors of the family."

The servant reappeared carrying a lovely black velvet cape with a light blue lining. Jessie took it from him and hung it about my shoulders. "Do you think this will keep you warm enough?" he asked, leaning forward to whisper in my ear. His breath licking at my skin caused me to shiver all over but also created an intense heat in the very center of my soul.

"Yes," I told him, never wanting to be more than an inch away from him for the rest of my life. "I feel warmer already."

We needed a surprising amount of carriages for not that big of a dinner party, but almost all the women were in the double-wide dresses, so that took up a lot of extra space.

Jessie and I were at the back of the line, and all that was left besides us was Madame Csorbo, the Duke, and Vilma.

“Why don’t the three of us go together, and my mom and her consort can take the last carriage?” Vilma suggested, slinking her hand around Jessie’s free arm.

“Don’t be absurd,” Madame Csorbo said, extricating Jessie from her daughter’s grasp. “They’re affianced; they want some privacy. You can ride with the Duke and me.”

The next carriage rolled to a stop in front of us. It was Cinderella perfect with gold trim and lacquered panels covered in paintings of cupids and roses. A man in beige livery stepped forward to get the door and help me in. “I’ll take it from here,” Jessie said, taking my hand and using his other arm to encircle my waist.

It’s not really obvious when watching a movie, but riding in a carriage is very cramped and actually really slow. There was only so close Jessie could sit next to me due to my zeppelin-sized skirt, but he was able to still hold my hand. “Did you enjoy your dinner?” he asked.

“I enjoyed that the other guests enjoyed it,” I said, hedging. “Why was everyone so excited?”

“Most humans don’t realize it, but the enjoyment of food is such a huge part of existence. We vampires end up missing it a lot more than we think we’re going to after we’ve turned.”

His words made me think of something. “Why did you put an avocado in the bag you left me?”

Jessie’s eyes widened and then narrowed with concern. “Don’t you like avocados?”

“Sure,” I told him. “Who doesn’t? But that doesn’t explain what it was doing in your bag.”

“I don’t know.” He looked down, obviously a little embarrassed. “I’ve never had one, you know, and people are always talking about them. They just sound so delicious. I thought you’d enjoy one on the plane.”

“People aren’t always talking about avocados,” I exclaimed, trying to stifle a laugh.

“Sure they do,” he insisted. “And they’re in everything now. Salads, on hamburgers, guacamole. When we get back to Tiburon, pay attention. People talk about avocados more than you think.”

He was probably right; I wasn’t going to keep arguing with him. I guess I had been taking my avocado consumption for granted.

“Where are we going?” I asked, mostly to change the conversation. I’d had enough food talk for one evening.

“It’s an old ballroom that one of the families bought when the world economy went bad,” he said in a very offhanded manner.

“We’re going to a vampire ball in a ballroom?”

“Sure,” he said with a smile, his gray eyes twinkling. “Where else would we have one?”

I thought about it. “I guess I thought we’d be headed to an old cathedral or crumbling castle or something.”

“Those are all good locations as far as atmosphere,” Jessie agreed. “But actually more hassle than they’re worth.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there’s always some neighbor the next crumbling castle over complaining about the noise or people protesting that we’re not being respectful of their religion. It goes on and on. This way people are actually happy that a historic building has been saved. And if they want, they can rent it out for their own events like weddings or whatever. All they have to do is book it online.”

There was definitely a business side to being a vampire that I had never considered. Being around for hundreds of years probably made you savvier than the average investor.

“We’re here,” Jessie said, peeking out the carriage window as the horses slowed from their trot. “There’s a bit of a line in front of us, so this might take a while.” He rolled his

eyes. "Every vampire likes to make an entrance." I remembered Madame Orzy's instructions about pausing at the top of the stairs and had to suppress a giggle.

I leaned over to get a peek out of the window on my side, mindful of the hat perched high on my head. There was a long line of cars and carriages in front of a rather large building. In the dark, I couldn't make out much of the architectural details of the building beyond it was big. Most of the cars that were conveying guests to the ball were antiques. Beautifully preserved antiques, of course, but there was nothing more recent than sixty years ago would have been my guess. "Why all the old cars?" I asked.

Jessie squinted a bit as he thought about it. "I don't know for sure. Vampires tend to get stuck in the time period from when they were human. At first you go along, changing with the modern world, but then after sixty or seventy years or so, you just don't want to change anymore. You just want to go back to a time where you're comfortable.

I thought about my grandmother and great grandmother both refusing to use the Internet. "I think that's kind of a human thing too," I told him.

Jessie squeezed my hand. "Let's talk about the ball before we go in."

"Okay," I said, feeling a catch of nervousness.

"There's no live feeding at our balls. Or, at least, at this kind of ball," he corrected himself. "But that doesn't mean people don't slip up. Don't go anywhere with anyone, no matter how friendly they seem. Vampires get hungry, and you're a tempting morsel."

"Okay." I gulped.

I must have looked quite pale under all my powder because Jessie gave my hand another reassuring squeeze. "Just stay by me, and everything will be fine. I wouldn't take you here if I thought it was actually dangerous."

Our carriage rolled forward a few more feet, and the door was opened by a man in a fancy, ruffled uniform and a

George Washington-style white wig. He said something in Hungarian, which I assumed was “Good evening” or something like that, and extended a hand to help us out of the carriage.

Heading into the ballroom on Jessie’s arm, I took a deep breath and tried to savor the moment. I felt just like Cinderella. But instead of losing a slipper, there was a chance I would be attacked by vampires and drained of all my blood.

Chapter 25

The music of a quintet greeted us as we entered the building's foyer. The musicians were also wearing matching ruffled uniforms and white wigs. I didn't know which famous classical composer they were playing, but it felt very appropriate for a room filled with aspiring Marie Antoinettes. Men were bowing; ladies were curtsying; fans were fluttering; and people were delighting over surprise encounters with someone they knew and had probably seen earlier in the week. There were a few people, beyond the servants, that I thought were still human. I sensed a certain nervous vitality about them that just wasn't present in the undead guests, although the vampires were much more animated.

Jessie and I were arm in arm. He reached over and patted my hand after we checked my cloak. "Would you like a glass of champagne?"

"Um... What kind of champagne?" I asked.

He looked confused. "The kind with bubbles."

"Yeah, but..." I lowered my voice. "Is it safe for me to drink?" The last time I drank champagne at a vampire party, Blossom ended up unconscious for the entire night, and I had to fight for our lives.

“Yes, it’s quite safe,” Jessie assured me. “I wouldn’t take anything a stranger offers you, but the champagne served by the staff should be safe.”

“Okay, then. Yes, please,” I told him, and Jessie flagged a passing waiter. Even without the possibility of being used as a snack, a vampire ball sounded more fraught with dangers than a wild party at a frat house.

I had no intention of getting anywhere close to tipsy, but a glass of champagne would definitely take the edge off. I knew I looked like one of the nervous humans rather than one of the vivacious undead. We walked through the crowded foyer admiring the elaborate costumes. People frequently greeted Jessie and asked to be introduced, saying things like, “So this is the little lady.” They made me feel about five years old, which I guess in vampire years, I was.

I couldn’t tell if it was my imagination, but all the reckless gaiety of the crowd felt a little strained to me, a little manufactured. It was like that famous party scene in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. All the guests are supposed to be so madcap and free spirited, but it always felt contrived. Like everyone was trying too hard. I always thought that scene must be what it’s like to live in San Francisco.

“What dances are we doing now?” Jessie asked one of these casual acquaintances drifting past. The man said something that I didn’t quite catch over the pulse of the crowd, but it made Jessie grin. “That sounds perfect.”

“What is it?” I asked him. “What’s the dance?”

“Not telling,” he said, but his eyes were twinkling with amusement. “But trust me; you’re going to love it.”

I was going to love it? What could possibly be the type of dancing that I was going to love? The waltz? Jessie was so strong, he could probably just hold me up and swing me around the room. I began to feel nervous about making an ass out of myself in front of the most fashionable vampires on the planet. “Jessie?” I said in a small voice.

“Yes?” He gave me his full attention.

“I think maybe I’ve twisted my ankle.”

“You haven’t twisted your ankle,” he told me. “You’ll be fine.” He scored another glass of champagne off a tray and handed it to me. “Here’s some liquid courage, but after this we’re going to dance.”

He was right; I was being a baby. So what if I made a goof out of myself. In the eyes of most the vampires, I was just a human anyway, so it really didn’t matter.

After I finished my glass of bubbly, Jessie wouldn’t be delayed any longer. “Come on,” he said, hooking a hand around my waist so I couldn’t get away. I knew of some guys that were willing to dance, but I’d never known any guy that was eager to dance.

The dance floor was crowded with couples as we entered the room. A song was just ending, but it was too far at the tail end for me to identify what they were playing. I was definitely surprised there was a DJ and not an orchestra. The costumes in the foyer had been fanciful, but the ones in the ballroom were really over the top. There were people wearing monstrous hats and others walking on stilts. I was pleased to see that Vilma wasn’t the only vampiress to think of just wearing her underwear. Some dancers wore giant papier-mâché heads while others were dressed quite simply with the minimum of finery.

The next song started, and I could hear what sounded like a hunting bugle followed by the sound of drums or maybe horses hooves; I couldn’t tell. “What the hell?” I said mostly to myself.

“Stand and deliver!” Adam Ant commanded.

“What?” I exclaimed. Eighties music? That was what the vampires were dancing to at their fancy rococo ball? Eighties music? I knew the song well enough. My mom had grown up in the eighties, and she still loved the music.

The vampires started to shimmy and leap about. It seemed so bizarre that I couldn’t help but crack up. Soon Jessie was laughing, too, and we started to dance. “I knew

you would love it," he shouted over the beat. He was right. It was time to relax and just plain have fun.

If I was to make a play list of all my favorite eighties dance music, the vampire DJ would have come pretty close. I could have done without the Love and Rockets. Having a hundred vampires surrounding me while howling, "I'm alive, so alive," was a little unnerving. Even Jessie let loose and sang along with the rest of them. He held me close, and I could hear his voice reverberating in his chest.

The next song was one of Blossom and my absolute favorites, "Just Like Heaven" by The Cure. Freshman year, she would sleep over, and we'd have a dance party. Whenever we'd put that song on, we would fling our arms out wide, swing them around, and sway. I don't know if we were birds or airplanes or what. But as Blossom always said, "When you dance to The Cure, you've got to dance free."

I was feeling warm and happy. Jessie was smiling, his eyes sparkling every time he looked at me. I decide to say "the hell with it," threw my arms out wide, closed my eyes, and just enjoyed the moment.

Jessie had one arm around my waist, swaying with me to the music. I thought he was lost in the music as well, but about halfway through the song, I heard him start to chuckle.

"What?" I asked, opening my eyes.

"Look," he said, nodding toward the other dancers. "I think you're a hit."

It was true. Almost everyone in the ballroom had their arms spread wide, imitating my moves. It really was the perfect way to dance to the song. Still, I felt a wave of embarrassment that I was so noticeable on the dance floor and hid my face against Jessie's vest. I could tell he was thoroughly enjoying laughing at me.

Eventually, the DJ put on a slow song. It was one that I didn't recognize, but it had that eighties feel with an electric keyboard in the background. Jessie put his right arm around

my waist and pulled me close, his left hand holding my right. I curled into him, allowing him to guide me, feeling every single cell in my body tingle.

I couldn't pick up on most the lyrics, but Jessie was humming along. I could feel his words rumbling in my ear. The refrain went something like, "I promise you. I promise you, I will."

When I first met Jessie, I ended up with his tuxedo jacket for several days. I knew it was childish, but every night I would wrap the cloth arms around me and pretend I was slow dancing with him. But that was nothing compared to actually being with him, moving with him, feeling his strong arms around me. I leaned closer and inhaled the clove-covered orange fragrance of him. There are few perfect moments in life, but I knew I was experiencing one of them.

I would have been happy to keep dancing with Jessie forever, but eventually nature called, and I needed to excuse myself for the ladies room. Jessie frowned. "I should go with you."

"To the ladies room?" I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"I guess you're right," he said. "I'm sure you won't find any vampires in there."

He couldn't have been more wrong. As soon as I walked in the door, I realized there were at least a dozen vampiresses sitting in a little lounge area. I guess even undead women need a place to get away from men. Vilma was one of them, and she looked directly at me. I quickly walked through to the next room, where the sinks and toilets were, and did as nature intended. Then I took an extended period of time washing my hands in the hope that Vilma would be gone by the time I was ready to leave.

No such luck. When I turned away from the sink to dry my hands, Vilma was standing right behind me.

I let out a little, "Oh!" and then added, "Sorry, I didn't see you there." Vampires could be lightning quick.

She fixed me with her piercing blue eyes. "Do you really think you're the reincarnation of that dead girl? The one that Jessie was so hot for a hundred years ago?"

I wanted to tell her to go pound salt, but I found that I really couldn't move. It was like my feet were glued to the tile. "I don't know," I felt compelled to say. "I feel connected to Jessie, and I sometimes dream Colette's memories, but I don't know what that means."

Vilma narrowed her eyes at me. "What do you mean by *connected*?"

She was being awfully nosey. I mentally tried to force my feet to walk around her and out the door but couldn't get them to move. "I mean, when I'm with him, I feel like we're the only two people in the whole world. And when I'm not with him, I have an ache inside that can't be filled."

"Then why were you with that boy? The blond one. You were always smashing your face against his. That doesn't sound like a girl who feels all hollow inside," she snarled.

"I know," I said, letting my shoulders slump. "I was trying to forget Jessie. He said it was too dangerous for us to be together. But it didn't work. I didn't stop loving him. I didn't stop thinking about him every second of every day." I felt tears starting to brim in my eyes, and I blinked furiously.

"Don't do that," Vilma snapped. "You'll ruin your makeup."

"Sorry," I sniffed, although I wasn't sure why I was apologizing.

"And how do you feel about Jessie being a vampire?" she asked. I think my tears had unnerved her because her gaze became a little less intense. I felt slightly less frozen to the floor.

"He can't change who he is," I said with a shrug. "I love him, and I have to accept that we are different."

"Yes," Vilma said, "*he* can't change who he is." She looked me over with a critical eye.

"Is there anything else you want to quiz me about, or can I get going?" I asked her, starting to feel more myself. "Jessie's waiting for me."

Grabbing me by the arm and jerking me closer, Vilma snarled, "You'll leave when I tell you to leave." Her eyes were blazing again, but I didn't care as much. I was angry, and she was being a jerk. "You need to leave Jessie alone," she said, putting as much intensity as she could into her words. "You're going to go back home and forget that he even exists." Her blue eyes were glowing purple with the intensity of her stare. "In fact, you are going to forget that vampires exist. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Then tell me," she commanded. "Tell me what you're going to do?"

I started to feel a small ache in the back of my head. "You want me to forget about Jessie and leave him alone."

"And that's what you're going to do?" she asked, arching one eyebrow.

I could feel her compelling me to say yes, but that wasn't how I felt. I could sooner fly than stop loving Jessie. It took a while for the word to form on my lips, but eventually I was able to say, "No."

"What?" Vilma was surprised and more than a little outraged.

"No," I repeated. It came easier the second time. "I can't," I insisted. "I know it would be easier. I know I would be safer and probably live a lot longer, but I don't know..." I shook my head. "Every thread of my being tells me that being with Jessie is the right thing to do. Not like lust or some high school crush, but something deep in my soul. We are connected, and you glaring at me with your crazy vampire eyes isn't going to change the way I feel."

Vilma's mouth fell open. She gaped at me for several seconds before tossing her head a little and saying, "Fine." With that, she turned and stalked out of the room.

I felt dizzy, like all the blood had rushed from my head. Clutching for the sink to support me, I seriously considered either throwing up or passing out.

There was the sound of a toilet flushing, and a woman exited one of the stalls. She was dressed in pink and green silk like a giant piece of candy. "Are you all right, honey?" she asked.

I looked up at her, my head clearing a bit. She was beautiful, but a little older than I expected. "What the hell was that about?" I asked.

"Vampires." The woman chuckled, sounding a bit weary. "You know how most guys think that just because they have a penis, they should be in charge? Well, a lot of vampires feel that way, but with fangs."

It took a few more minutes of me supporting myself with the sink to feel steady enough to head back into the ballroom. Vilma had definitely tried to bend me to her wishes, but vampire or no vampire, it would take more than an undead mean girl to make me give up Jessie.

Finally feeling more myself, I headed back out into the ballroom. I had expected to see Jessie loitering somewhere near the door, but he was nowhere to be found.

More vampires must have decided to dance because the room felt much more crowded. The music had shifted from the eighties pop to nineties grunge, and it was turned up loud. A tall man in a long cape and wearing a papier-mâché head kept bumping into me. I took a few steps back to create some distance between us, but he filled the gap and started crowding me again. I didn't know what his deal was, but he was being pretty rude and stank of onions.

Oh crap! He wasn't just drunk or rude. He was the guy from the airport, and he was trying to herd me away from the crowd. I drew breath to scream, but ended up saying, "Ouch!" as something sharp jabbed me in the shoulder.

The world began to spin more quickly, and the dark corners of the room closed in until I was just looking through

a pinhole in a wall of black. And then nothing.

Chapter 26

I opened my eyes, but my world was still pitch black. My head was swimming, and my mouth tasted like a car battery. I wondered if I had thrown up and if any of it got on my dress. I tried to sit up, immediately hit my head, and was knocked back down.

Where the hell was I?

My heart started racing, and I suddenly felt like I couldn't breathe. I was on my back in a small, black space with absolutely no room to sit up. I was in a coffin.

I curled on my side and tried to keep from hyperventilating, focusing on slowing my breath. Madame Orzy had been right; the birdcage did collapse when necessary. Eventually, I realized two things: I wasn't in a coffin because there was room to the right and the left of me, and whatever I was in was moving—I could feel the floor beneath me shifting up and down like a car on a bumpy road. I was in a car, I told myself. I was locked in the trunk of a car.

I began feeling around me to see if I could find a tool or some kind of weapon. There was a pile of something damp, and I had to assume from the smell that I had been sick. I tried to think of what I was supposed to do if ever

locked in the trunk of a car. It didn't help that my head was still spinning.

Okay, my brain pieced it together. I was supposed to kick out the taillight and try to signal anyone driving behind the car. Hopefully, it wouldn't be more gangsters.

There wasn't much in the trunk. I felt around and only found some wire coat hangers and a few papers. I tried kicking the taillight near my feet but couldn't really tell what I was doing. Eventually, I twisted myself over to the side, negotiating around my skirt, and wrenched off one of my pilgrim shoes. Using it to protect my hand, I punched and punched at what I thought was the taillight closest to my face. I could hear plastic snapping and thought maybe I was seeing a little light crack through the darkness.

The car went over a large lump, and I was slammed against the roof of the trunk. I was pretty sure we'd just gone over a speed bump. By the sudden and numerous turns we were taking, all to the left, I wondered if we were in a parking garage. The sounds had changed, too. The street noise was gone, and everything had more of an echo.

I could tell by the angle of the car we were going up. And up and up. I had to guess we were heading to the top of the garage. I gave up on my plans for the taillight and fumbled for the hangers, straightening the curved hook and bending the triangle bodies so I could clench them in my fists.

We came to a stop, and I could hear some men talking in what I assumed was Hungarian. I heard the car doors opening and closing as they got out. I had a hanger gripped tightly in each hand, concealing them both under my skirt.

There was more talking, and then the trunk opened. I saw the big man that tried to grab me at the airport. He scowled at me and then said something over his shoulder to another man standing a few steps back from the trunk. I couldn't see the other man; I only heard his voice.

The big man leaned in to grab me, and I stabbed him in the cheek with the end of the coat hanger. To be honest, I was aiming for his eye, but I had never stabbed anyone with anything before, and I was nervous. I know that sounds brutal, but if he didn't want to get stabbed in the eye, he shouldn't have drugged me and stuffed me in the trunk of his car.

The man let out a shriek, and the hanger got knocked out of my hand as he jerked away from me. He was howling and, I'm quite sure, swearing in Hungarian. The other man, much younger, came in to cuff me, but I stabbed him in the hand with the other hanger. Screw both of them if they thought I was just going to lie there and not defend myself. I jumped out of the trunk and started running. I had no idea where I was going, but I sure as hell was going to try to figure something out.

A sharp blow to the head sent me crashing to the ground. It was the big man, blood streaming down his cheek. I couldn't understand most of what he said beyond the word, "Bitch!" As if I was at fault for trying to save my own life.

He had me by the hair and started dragging me to the edge of the parking structure. I kicked and clawed at him, but it wasn't any good. The goon was too angry at that point to feel any pain. He grabbed me and lifted me over his head, wanting to hurl me off of the garage. "This is for Count Adami," he told me. Wrenching my body around, I grabbed him by the hair and held on for dear life. If I was going over, he was going with me.

The big man's friend joined him, slapping me in the face to try to get me to release my grip. I still hung on. I had known when I left Tiburon that there was a good chance I was going to die in Budapest, but I had thought it would involve a group of vampires in a feeding frenzy, not being flung off a parking garage by some mobbed-up thug.

Out of nowhere, I heard Jessie's voice. "Aurora, let go," he commanded.

"Are you crazy?" I shouted back.

"Just trust me and let go."

Trusting Jessie was something I knew how to do. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and unlocked my fingers. I felt the big man hurtling me into the night. I didn't mean to scream, but I couldn't help it.

"Oof!" I said, all the air escaping my lungs as Jessie snatched me out of the sky. He was a vampire, after all; he knew how to fly.

"I've got you," he said, cradling me in his arms. I let out another scream and buried my face in his chest.

Instead of flying me the hell away from there, he returned to the roof and set me down gently a good distance from the men. "What are you doing?" I asked, still wobbly on my feet from the injection and the terror.

"Don't worry," he said in a calm voice with rage seething just underneath. His eyes looked wild, like he was a panther about to tear apart its prey. "I'll be right back. There's just something I need to take care of first."

"Jessie, don't," I said, pulling at his coat, but he wasn't listening.

"Run!" I shouted at the two Mob guys. "You've got to run!" Sure, they'd been paid to kill me, but the look in Jessie's eyes had me almost as terrified as being in the trunk.

Three more figures appeared out of the sky causing both Mob guys to panic. The younger one exclaimed something, looking surprised and terrified. Jessie laughed, looking more like Satan than a saint, and then snarled something at him in return. It was pretty dark, but I could just make out the other three vampires. It was Vilma, the Duke, and another man, possibly the one that told Jessie about the dancing. They did not appear happy.

There was a brief conversation in Hungarian between vampires, and then suddenly Jessie was at my side. "Are you ready to go?" he asked, trying to appear calm.

"Jessie, you can't," I said, feeling tears filling my eyes. "They're just..." I stammered. "Please don't let anybody hurt them."

Gathering me in his arms, he whispered, "Don't worry, my darling girl. They'll live."

And then we were flying over the rooftops of Budapest, Jessie's arms around me, the wind whistling through the bedraggled mess that was my hair. "My hat," I yelped, suddenly realizing it was gone. "Oh, crud," I said with a slight whimper. The little boat was so charming, and now it was gone.

"I'll order you a new one," Jessie assured me.

"No, that's okay," I told him. "I couldn't keep it anyway, it's just... It was pretty."

We arrived at the Csorbo villa. Rather than landing us in the courtyard, like I was expecting, he set me down outside the main gate. "Aren't we going in?" I asked.

"Sure," he assured me, "but it's rude to just fly into someone's home. This way is more polite."

A few moments later a guard opened the gate, letting us in. The night air was very chilly, and I shivered a little.

"Oh," I exclaimed. "I don't have Madame Csorbo's cloak."

Jessie laughed, his eyes looking merry rather than like the storm of anger that they had been on the roof. "It's fine," he told me. "I'm sure it'll get back to her. She was very worried when you disappeared from the ball." More servants ushered us into the house.

"What did that man say?" I asked.

"What man?" Jessie wanted to know.

"The younger one. On the roof of the garage. When your friends appeared. He said something. And then you laughed at him. What was it?"

"He said 'Impossible,' but I guess he was wrong," Jessie chuckled.

"Why were they after me?" I asked. We were inside the villa, and Jessie was leading me toward my room. "How does

the Mob even know I'm here?"

"A friend of Viktor's must have hired them to kill you before you were under the Bishops' rule," he said.

"But why?" The Bishops more than likely wanted to see me dead anyway; it seemed like a waste of money.

"In case the ruling's in your favor. If they kill you now, they haven't done anything wrong in the eyes of the law. But if the Bishops show us leniency, then killing you would be a crime."

"But that's cheating," I exclaimed as he opened the door to my room.

Jessie smiled and then kissed me on the forehead. "They're vampires," he said. "They're not necessarily worried about playing fair. Why do you think we had to form a government in the first place?"

Margaret came rushing. "Mademoiselle," she exclaimed. "Your beautiful gown! Are you hurt?"

I looked down. My beautiful sea of blue was torn and stained. "I'm all right," I told her. "But it really is a shame about the dress."

Gloria appeared in the doorway looking severe, and Jessie joined her for a conversation in the hall.

"We'll get you cleaned up in no time," Margaret assured me. "And I'll do my best with your gown."

Forty minutes later I was clean and makeup free with my hair detangled. Margaret had me wrapped in a cozy lavender robe, and the fireplace in my room had a roaring fire. I was curled up on a loveseat feeling toasty when Jessie came striding in. He still had on the pants and boots to his costume but was no longer wearing the jacket or vest. The very lightweight linen shirt he had on was open at the collar, and the fabric was slightly transparent—much to my delight.

Jessie sat down beside me, reached over, and squeezed my hand. "Besides the whole kidnapping thing, how did you enjoy the ball?"

"I loved it," I said, shifting so I could be a little closer to him. "It must be wonderful to be able to go to a ball any time you want."

"Mmmm..." Jessie said noncommittally. Eventually he added, "It was wonderful to be there with you."

"So it's not wonderful when I'm not around?" I asked, a little confused. The ball really had been spectacular.

Sighing, Jessie said, "Have you ever known anyone who's worked in a chocolate factory?"

"Sure," I told him, not really knowing where he was going with the conversation. "My Aunt Sue worked at a chocolate shop that made their own chocolates when she was in high school." When I was really little, she used to tell me about it. I would fantasize about working there when I grew up.

"Does she still eat chocolate?" he wanted to know.

"No." That's one thing I always found strange about Sue. She would not eat chocolate no matter what the occasion. Not even a little bite.

"And why doesn't she like it anymore?" he pressed. I felt like I was in some type of remedial class and he was trying to coax an answer out of me.

"Because she got sick of it," I said. "She had access to it all the time and... Oh, I get you."

Jessie nodded. "Something that was a treat became commonplace and then became boring to the point of distasteful."

"And that's how you feel about going to a ball? It's become distasteful?" I wanted to know, feeling just a little bit hurt and embarrassed. I had been having such a good time and to know that Jessie was thoroughly bored...

"Distasteful probably isn't the right word," he said. "They've just become oddly tiresome."

"I'm sorry you were bored," I told him, turning my head slightly away. I was definitely feeling hurt. He was definitely talented at faking a good time.

“You see, that’s the thing.” He gathered me closer in his arms even though I was trying to pull away. “Being there with you made everything new again. I got to see the ball through your eyes. That made it fresh. That’s why it was so fun. I haven’t enjoyed myself that much, anywhere, in decades.”

“Oh.” I relented, feeling less like a fool. “Okay, good. I’m glad you had fun.” I stopped struggling to put some space between us.

“Being with you makes everything more fun,” he said, leaning in and giving me a soft kiss.

I wasn’t expecting the kiss but gladly returned it. His lips were firm and his mouth cool. The kiss deepened.

We’d never actually kissed normally before, sitting on a couch or in a car or anything like a regular couple. Our kisses were usually fraught with emotion or peril, with me stumbling out of my bedroom window and flinging myself into his arms. We’d never had the opportunity to kiss leisurely and simply enjoy pressing our lips against each other’s.

I quickly remembered that I was wearing nothing but a robe, which was barely held closed by a narrow belt, and a pair of cotton panties. My thighs instantly felt tingly and warm; there was a throbbing heat building low in my belly. Jessie’s shirt pulled easily open, and I let my hands rove over his sculpted chest. He closed his eyes and released a small groan of pleasure. “Aurora,” he gasped.

That’s what I wanted. That’s what I needed. For him to know that it was me he was with; it was me in his arms. Not Colette or any other girl. “Oh, Jessie,” I whispered, my robe slipping open another inch. I had no experiences with boys beyond kissing and a bit of light groping in the back of Fred’s car, but with Jessie it was different. I knew I was ready. I wanted him to consume me. Not as a vampire but as a lover. I wanted Jessie to be my first, my last, my only lover.

"Jessie," I said again, on the verge of panting. "Oh, please," I groaned as his cool hand slipped inside my robe and found my breast, his thumb rubbing over my erect nipple. "I want you... to be with you," I told him. "I want us to be together."

"Oh, Aurora," Jessie said, his canine teeth extending into fangs. "I want you so badly, my darling." He kissed my mouth, my throat, his hands slowly undoing the tie of my robe. "I want..." And then he froze.

It took me a moment to realize he wasn't moving anymore. At that point I was on my knees, kind of half straddling him on the couch. I opened my eyes to look down at him, so beautiful, so perfect. "Don't stop," I insisted. "I don't want you to stop."

"No," Jessie said, his voice ragged and low. "I..." he stammered. "I don't want to stop," he admitted. "But if we keep going, I don't think I can stop." He put his hand to his mouth, covering his fangs, forming a physical barrier between them and my flesh. "And I don't want that. Not with you."

"But, Jessie," I told him, "if it means we can be together, then I don't mind losing a little blood."

"No," Jessie said, this time quite firmly. He disentangled himself from me and got to his feet. "I will not start down that road. Not with anyone, but especially not with you."

Standing there in front of me, he looked so wistful and yet tormented, that I knew I couldn't push him. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's just... I have so many feelings for you and what we were doing felt so right."

"Don't be sorry," he said, caressing my cheek. "Just knowing you, being able to reach out and touch your hair if I want, is so amazing to me. I've waited so long for you that I feel that if we rush things, you'll just evaporate like smoke through my fingers."

I felt a glimmer of hope. "So, you're saying that someday we might..." I gestured vaguely with my hand toward the couch.

He smiled, his gray eyes sparkling. "Maybe. If we're properly married first." He reached up to touch the point of one of his receding fangs. "And I have the time to practice extreme self control."

He wanted me. It felt so good to know that Jessie wanted me. That would have to be enough for the moment. And he was right. There was no reason to let my hormones go to my head. I was only seventeen. I could wait. Especially for a boy like Jessie.

"It's late," Jessie said, closing his shirt and smoothing his hair. "I'm sure you're exhausted. I should let you get some sleep."

Was he kidding? How was I supposed to sleep after all that kissing? "Okay," was all I could manage, even though my thighs were still tingling.

"Our audience with the Bishops is first thing tomorrow night, so try to get as much sleep as you can. The proceedings might take a while."

I nodded, already missing him, and he hadn't even left the room.

"Good night, darling," he said, darting forward and planting a small kiss on my lips before disappearing out the door.

Chapter 27

The dream started like an old movie that I'd seen so many times every detail was familiar. I was wearing my green dress with the white flowers, my best pair of shoes, and I had a small suitcase tucked under my arm. Even as I was asleep, I knew I was dreaming, knew I was watching a scene from someone else's life.

The dream shifted quickly, and the terror was upon me. I was in the woods, running for my life. I needed to find Jessie. I needed to get the hell out of the woods. My ankle caught in the tree root, and I went down hard, the ground jarring my bones. The beast was nearby. I could hear it sniffing the air, the twigs snapping beneath its feet. I tried not to move or even breathe. Eventually, I thought I heard it moving off to a different part of the woods. Still I was too afraid to run. After a long time of not hearing anything alarming, I cautiously lifted my head and looked around.

Jessie was there intently searching for me. I called out his name, and he swiftly turned in my direction. It was only after it was too late that I realized it wasn't Jessie. I had just signaled the beast.

The creature came lunging toward me, eager for a midnight feast. I was unable to move, unable to scream. I

just sat there doing nothing to defend myself. The beast was only a few yards away.

The earth suddenly fell away from beneath my feet. Jessie was there, holding me in his arms. We were flying, soaring through the air with the stars and the night all around us. I gave Jessie an incredulous look. He was laughing, the wind tousling his hair. "Impossible," I told him.

And that was when I woke up.

It was daytime. That was the only thing I knew for sure. My mouth was dry, and I was insanely thirsty. I rolled out of bed and started staggering around, eventually heading in the direction of the bathroom.

Splashing water on my face and gulping from the tap helped. I felt a bit more coherent. I wondered how long I had been asleep. Slouching back into the bedroom, I encountered Margaret with breakfast on a tray. "You're up," she said, giving me a cheery smile. She couldn't have gotten much more sleep than I did, but then again, she hadn't been drugged the night before and thrown off a parking garage. And she didn't have jet lag.

"What time is it?" I asked, eager for coffee although I don't normally drink the stuff.

"Almost one o'clock," was the reply.

A lot of my friends in Tiburon easily slept past one o'clock on a weekend, but I usually had to get up early for work at Cup of Joes, so I rarely had that luxury.

"Gloria has been waiting for you to get up so she can talk to you," Margaret said. "Shall I send her in, or would you rather wait until you're dressed."

"She can come in now, if she wants," I said, opening the door to the sitting room and gesturing with my head for Margaret to follow. "I don't mind if she doesn't mind."

I had expected Margaret to open the folding shutters to the windows so the sun could come in, but she didn't even look in their direction. Maybe it wasn't her job. I figured I could do it myself once I was done talking to Gloria. "I'll be

back to dress you," Margaret said once she'd placed everything on a table and was on her way out the door.

"That's okay. I don't need help getting dressed," I called after her.

She looked at me over her shoulder, both eyebrows raised. "Not even for the tribunal?"

"Okay, yeah." I had been desperately ignoring the fact that I had to face a jury of angry vampires. "You'd better come back."

She shot me a crooked smile and exited the room. A few moments later, Gloria came in. "Good morning," I greeted her.

"Good afternoon," she corrected me. "I trust that you slept well?"

I nodded. "Coffee?" I offered. I'd noticed that there were two cups. Gloria looked interested but then hesitated. "Oh, come on," I said to her. "It's not like any of the family is around. It would be rude not to have some after I've offered. And there's a full pot."

Gloria relented, and I filled a cup for her. Once we were seated and happily sipping, she said, "I'm sorry, but after the activities of last night, I don't believe it would be safe for you to go sightseeing this afternoon."

"Oh, okay." I hadn't really considered that I would be able to wedge in some sightseeing, so it wasn't much of a disappointment. "Who was it, by the way? Who hired those Mob guys to kill me?"

"A vampire who wanted revenge for Viktor Adami."

Answers like that irritated me. Obviously it was someone who wanted revenge for Viktor. I figured that part out when the thug said, "This is for Count Adami," before trying to fling me off a building.

"Come on, Gloria. What are you, a guy or something?" I snapped. When she gave me a questioning look, I added, "Don't treat me like I'm simple by giving me some super obvious answer. That's a guy move, and it's annoying."

"I'm not supposed to talk about the specifics of who did the hiring. The Bishops are worried that a vendetta between families will develop. All I'm allowed to say is that they know who is responsible, and it will be addressed."

Addressed wasn't good enough for me. *Addressed* would be for ruining my ship hat, not trying to fling me off of a parking garage. "So that's it?" I asked. "They'll get a slap on the wrists or something?"

"Not necessarily," Gloria said, finishing her coffee and then glancing longingly in the direction of the pot. I took her cup and refilled it. Maybe my kindness loosened her jaw a little because then she said, "A lot depends on the tribunal. If they rule against you, the family will not be charged. If they rule in your favor, then charges will be brought against them, and they will be punished accordingly."

"So that's why the windows are closed?" I asked. "You're worried someone will try to kill me before the tribunal?"

"Exactly," she said. Then she gave me a second look. "You're very astute for an American."

"Gee, thanks," I said, rolling my eyes. I loved backhanded compliments. "So, is there anything specific I should be doing today or...? I don't know. I guess I'm asking you what am I supposed to do."

"If you wouldn't mind, it would be easiest to keep you safe if you stayed in your rooms."

My first time in Budapest, my first time anywhere, really, and I got to spend the day locked in a few rooms so I wouldn't be rubbed out by the Mob who had been hired by a bunch of uptight vampires.

It wasn't fair, but I didn't really have a choice. "Okay," I said. "If that's the safest thing."

"Thank you for being reasonable," she said, getting up and returning her cup and saucer to the tray. "And thank you for the coffee." She obviously hadn't been expecting either one.

After Gloria left, I lingered over my breakfast then filled another half hour exploring the room. There were plenty of books, cards, and even a few board games, but no television and no radio. I put my Pools of Light pendant back on and then lounged on the couch thinking of Jessie. He was just so delicious. Still, I couldn't believe I had flung myself at him the previous night. The memory made me feel aroused and embarrassed all over again. I squirmed around on the sofa just thinking about his hands on my flesh. I knew some girls at my school didn't want the reputation of being virgins, but I never felt that way. I had been waiting for a real relationship where I was sure the guy cared about me. Maybe that was why I was so ready to be with Jessie.

Thinking about him after the previous night made me miss Jessie more intensely than the general dull ache I always felt in my heart when he wasn't around. I grabbed my bag and hopped back on the couch prepared to sigh over his photograph. Even if the photograph was a little fuzzy, I would still be able to see his image.

Pulling the snapshot out of the envelope where I kept it caused my heart to sink. I was still there, plain as day, but Jessie's image had faded significantly. His eyes were still visible, gray, and fathomless, his lips were still smiling at me, but the rest of his features had burnt away into a white nothingness.

Staring at the photograph made my stomach clench. Why had it faded so quickly? When had it faded? Did it mean something? Was there any significance behind it? Or was it just cheap film? If I had to guess, it was because I had been so willing to be intimate with Jessie. He'd said no, after all. I was quite sure Colette probably never would have made him that kind of offer. Did he really think worse of me somehow? I found it maddening that I could feel so sure of Jessie when I was in his arms but so insecure when I was away from him. With him, I felt beautiful and loved; away

from him, I felt like a silly, stupid teenager with a crush on a vampire.

Chapter 28

By the time it was five o'clock, I had worked myself up into a state of insecurity and a bit of panic. I was insecure because Jessie had, after all, rejected me when I'd offered myself to him. But on the other hand, he was from a time when sex was something that usually didn't happen until after marriage. Jessie was a gentleman, after all, and I had not been acting like a lady.

I was panicky because I was on the verge of facing my tribunal of vampires. When I thought about it, all of my instincts told me to jump out the window and flee into the countryside. The only problem was I had no idea how I would survive. I tried to think it through. During the night, I could sleep in a stake-enforced box or something, kind of turning myself into a reverse vampire, but I was sure whoever had hired the Mob to snuff me out would keep paying the humans to hunt me down during daylight hours. I had to face the vampires. My only hope of not completely melting down before the tribunal was having Jessie at my side. If they separated us, I was sure I wouldn't be able to handle it.

I was so grateful when Margaret finally returned with some dinner on a tray. "I assumed you didn't want lunch,"

she told me as she set out the food. "Seeing that you'd breakfasted so late."

"Margaret," I called after her as she turned to leave the room, "would you sit with me for a while. I'm making myself nuts alone in here."

"Oh, you poor thing; you must be frightened sick," she said, sounding very sympathetic.

I probably should have been solely worried about my own safety rather than spending half the day mooning over a fading photograph. But being found guilty by the Bishops felt so abstract. I couldn't quite keep it in my brain.

Potentially being rejected by a guy was something I was used to. I knew how those emotions functioned. But a vampire tribunal deciding my fate? No, it just felt too alien to me to think about for long. Still, I didn't want Margaret to think I was a foolish little idiot. "Yes, it's... stressful," I told her. "Has there been any news today?"

"Not that I've heard." She started loading food on a plate. "The family has added extra security, but besides that, everything has been quiet." Looking up from what she was doing, she asked, "Do you like black pepper?"

"You're not making that for me, are you?" I asked, springing to my feet. "I thought you were joining me for a snack."

"Don't be silly, Colette," she said, setting the plate down on the table. "If I was to eat your meal and the Csorbos found out, I would be discharged immediately. And being fired by a vampire family is much worse than being fired by anyone else."

"Can you at least sit with me for a little bit?" I asked in a small voice, sounding like a little girl. I hadn't meant to potentially get her in trouble.

"Why don't you start eating, and I'll get your clothes ready for the tribunal. I'll join you when I'm finished."

"But I have my own clothes," I insisted. I had packed my most respectable outfit for the occasion.

“That’s okay,” she told me. “Mr. Vanderlind has selected some clothes for you.”

More clothes? I had to wonder. In a way it felt good that Jessie was so willing to take care of me, but in a way it felt condescending, like he didn’t trust me to make any decisions on my own. Still, he probably knew better than I did what to wear to a vampire tribunal.

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected in terms of the outfit Jessie had selected. A business suit, perhaps? But it turned out to be a blue dress with sprigs of red and yellow flowers all over it, very Laura Ashley. The long sleeves were puffed at the shoulders, and there was a bit of lace at the collar. Margaret insisted on helping me get into it, and I was too afraid to say no for fear the Csorbos would fire her if I didn’t agree, and then God knows what would happen to her.

With the dress on, I felt very prim and not at all like myself. Plus the style was all wrong for the season. November in Budapest was cold. I guessed Jessie was hoping to make me look as much like Colette as he could.

I hated it. I hated everything about it. I hated it so much, it made my skin itch. I looked over at Margaret. “If I keep this thing on, I’m going to break out in hives,” I told her.

“Oh. No. It’s...” she floundered for some gentle words. “It’s very nice.”

“No,” I said firmly, shaking my head. “I’m not wearing this.”

“But Mr. Vanderlind,” she tried to protest.

“I don’t care what Jessie said. I’m not going to face a pack of judgmental vampires looking like an extra from *Little House on the Prairie*. I’m wearing my own clothes.”

I mean, it wasn’t like I was putting on a pair of torn jeans and a tank top. I had packed pretty much the same outfit that I’d worn to meet Jessie’s mother, but I’d substituted out the skirt for a pair of gray wool pants.

Budapest was just a little too chilly in November for me to deal with a skirt.

While I was changing, Margaret fussed around me, fretting. "Don't worry," I assured her. "I'll tell Jessie that you tried very hard to get me to wear the dress, but that I flat out refused and insisted on my own clothes."

A flash of relief passed over her face. "Thank you. That would really be helpful."

There was a knock at the door, and Gloria stuck her head in. "The family is up. They've finished eating and are ready to go. Mr. Vanderlind wanted me to check that you are ready and have everything you need."

My stomach did a flip thinking about the vampires feeding, but I ignored it. "I'm fine," I said, grabbing my bag. "Tell him I'm ready." Ready to face the vampire inquisition.

As I headed downstairs, I was surprised to see not just Jessie waiting for me, but Vilma, the Duke, and Madame Csorbo, plus a young vampire and a middle-aged vampiress that I didn't recognize. "What's going on?" I asked Jessie in a low voice.

"The roads aren't safe, so we're going to fly there." He jerked his head toward the other vampires. "This is our escort."

"We need an escort?" I gulped. And Vilma was part of it? That sounded like a recipe for getting stabbed in the back. "What do you possibly think is going to happen?"

"We don't know what's going to happen," he replied, his mouth forming a grim line. "We just know that there's at least one vampire who really doesn't want you to make it to the inquest, and he has the money to pay for a lot of hired guns."

"So, mobsters?" I asked.

Jessie nodded, slipping an arm around my waist. At least soaring through the air would make it harder for anyone to stab me with a needle.

“And what about other vampires?” I wanted to know. All I needed was both the Mob and the undead trying to get me.

“It’s unlikely,” he assured me. “Most are waiting to hear the ruling before siding with anyone.”

“Okay.” I nodded, trying to keep my lower lip from trembling. I had been in denial ever since Jessie told me we had to go to Budapest. I had wasted my time worrying about if he wanted me or if I was hurting my mom by lying to her about my dad. But maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it was better that my brain had just decided not to give much thought to the inquest because there was really nothing I could do.

Jessie wrapped his other arm around me and held me tight. Whispering in my ear, he said, “I promise you, I will not let anyone harm you. Even if things don’t go our way, I will keep you safe. I swear this with my life.”

Turning to our escort, Jessie said, “I guess we’d better get going.”

Madame Csorbo came forward and grabbed both my hands, as was her habit. “My dear,” she said. “Please do take the best care of yourself. My prayers are with you.” I guess it made sense that she would not be part of the escort. She was the only one in a dress.

Since we were flying, I was extra glad I had refused to wear the Laura Ingalls dress. I didn’t need to moon half of Budapest on my way to face down a bunch of vampires. Jessie noticed my clothes as well. “Didn’t Margaret tell you I selected a dress for you?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “She did. And I even tried it on because she forced me to, but it was too awful. I felt all itchy and gross. I just couldn’t face the Bishops in that thing. I mean, seriously, what were you thinking?”

Jessie chuckled. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I guess I forgot for a moment that you are a modern girl.”

We all headed outside and down the front steps. Madame Csorbo waved at us from the doorway. "Good luck," she called, almost cheerfully.

"Ready?" Jessie asked, addressing his compatriots. There were some nods in affirmation. Jessie swept me into his arms and lifted off into the air. The other vampires followed suit, surrounding us, one on each side.

The sun had gone down early because it was fall, but with the partial moon and the lights from the city, it wasn't pitch black out or anything. "What keeps people from noticing us?" I asked, the wind whipping around us. My pea coat wasn't doing much in terms of keeping out the cold.

Jessie noticed me shivering and pulled me closer. "People just don't look up that much when there isn't a full moon. Especially in the cities. You'd be surprised."

"If you say so," I said with a shrug, wondering how often I looked up past the streetlights. Or at least how often I'd done it before I knew vampires existed.

Although I was cold and pretty darn scared, it was wonderful to see Budapest by air. America just doesn't have the same architectural beauty as the old cities of Europe. I couldn't help but look around and marvel as we flew.

It was only a few minutes before Jessie said, "Not too long now," and we dropped lower in the sky. Then he called to the others, "Keep your eyes open."

He no more than said it when there was a loud bang and we were knocked to the side as if someone had crashed into us with a Buick. "What was that?" I yelped.

"It's nothing," Jessie said with a grimace, but I couldn't help but notice we were quickly losing more altitude.

"Where?" Vilma asked, obviously knowing more than I did about what had just happened.

"The bell tower," was Jessie's reply.

"Bell tower," Vilma repeated to the other vampiress, and the two women zoomed off toward a nearby church. The

Duke and the other male vampire pulled in closer, practically flying shoulder to shoulder with Jessie.

Turning his attention back to me, Jessie said, "I need you to hang on tight for a minute."

I was already clinging to him, but his words made me wrap my legs around his torso. "What's going on?" I asked.

"Just keep your head down." Jessie grunted. He'd let go of me and was reaching around my back to massage his right shoulder with his left hand.

"What's going on?" I repeated, getting desperate to know. I had to trust that if I fell, Jessie would catch me, but still, I was used to his arms holding me firmly when we flew. Jessie let out a loud grunt, and I saw something small and gray fall away from his shoulder. "What was that?" I demanded.

"A bullet," he said, returning his hands to my waist.

"A what?" I all but shouted.

"There's no reason to get upset," he assured me. "I've just been shot."

Chapter 29

"You've been what?" I shrieked, squirming around, trying to get a look at Jessie's shoulder.

"There's someone in the bell tower with a rifle," he said. "So I need you to keep your head down." To emphasize the point, Jessie put his hand on top of my head and tried to tuck me to his chest.

"Someone's shooting at us?" I was having trouble processing his words. "Why would someone be shooting at a bunch of vampires?" It didn't make sense. A crossbow, maybe, but bullets were made out of lead.

"They're not shooting at us," he explained, exasperation filling his voice. "They're shooting at you. So I need you to stop talking and get your head down. I can heal almost instantly. You can't."

"Oh!" I instantly hunched my head and pulled up my legs, trying to curl into as tiny of a ball as possible.

Another shot rang out from off to the left, the bullet tearing at Jessie's coat. "Damn it! This is camel hair," he growled.

"The high rise?" the Duke asked, nodding toward a building that definitely had that brick, nineteen-fifties squareness to it.

"Yeah," the other vampire agreed. "He's on the roof. I'll take him; you stay with the girl."

"Just because I'm older, doesn't mean I don't want to still have fun," the Duke complained, but it was too late because the other vampire had already peeled off, zooming toward the building.

I wondered how Jessie would feel if I actually threw up on his camel hair topcoat. "Are we almost there?" I whimpered.

Jessie kissed my temple. "Hold on, my love," he breathed in my ear. Then he put on a burst of speed, diving low in the sky, sending the buildings whizzing by.

"Give a fellow a little warning," the Duke called after him, flying hard on his heels.

We dropped out of the sky, and before I could get my bearings, Jessie had set me on the pavement and was jerking open the door to a very modern-looking office building with lots of glass. The building could very well have doubled as a newer bank, but without the ATMs out front. The Duke was behind us, shielding me with his body. "Quick, get inside," Jessie commanded, shoving me through the door.

I heard a loud pop, pop, pop, and three bullet holes appeared in the glass just as the Duke pulled the door shut. I stumbled over my own feet and sat down hard. "Don't worry," Jessie said, scooping me back up. "Bulletproof."

The next thing I knew, we were in a well-lit lobby. A pretty woman sitting behind a desk looked up. "Yes?" she said, with a hint of a smile for Jessie. "May I help you?" The hail of bullets as we'd entered the building hadn't rattled her at all.

"We have an eight o'clock appointment on the thirteenth floor," Jessie replied.

The woman looked down at her computer screen. "Name?"

"Jessie Vanderlind and Colette Gibson."

“Just sign in and you can go on up,” she told us. “The Bishops are expecting you.”

Jessie added his name to a clipboard sign-in sheet then handed me the pen. “Colette,” he said, giving me a significant look.

Begrudgingly, I signed in as Colette Gibson. Jessie obviously had his reasons for forcing me to take on the name of my dead aunt.

As Jessie pushed the button and we waited for the elevator, the Duke approached the desk and gave his name. “Should we wait for him?” I asked.

“No.” Jessie shook his head. “We should be safe in here. You’re the only human in the building, and no vampire is going to attack us right under the Bishops’ roof.”

“What will the vampires do to those guys shooting at us?” I asked.

Jessie looked me in the eyes. “Do you really want the answer to that question?”

The light came on, a bell chimed, and the elevator doors opened. We stepped aboard, and Jessie pushed the button for the thirteenth floor. “The Bishops are on the thirteenth floor?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “They own the whole building. The thirteenth floor is just where they hold the inquests. Someone’s idea of a joke.”

I pawed through my bag for a brush, wishing I had tied my hair back—if only I’d known we were going to fly. “This seems like a very strange place for a bunch of vampires to hold a trial,” I commented.

“Does it?” Jessie glanced around at the interior of the elevator. “Where did you think we’d hold it? In a basement somewhere?”

“Or a crypt,” I mumbled under my breath.

“Okay, no more of that talk, Colette,” he said, putting his arm around me. “Just remember, you’re the reincarnation of Colette Gibson, and we’re madly in love.” Looking up at

his handsome face and his ruffled black hair, I knew I could at least remember the second part.

The doors opened, and we were in another lobby—just like in a medical building. We signed in again and took a seat on one of the brown leather sofas. Muzak was being piped in, and I thought maybe it was *The Girl from Ipanema*. “This reminds me of the elevator scene from *The Blues Brothers*,” I commented.

“What?” Jessie gave me a peculiar look.

“Never mind.” I shook my head. “I just watch too many eighties movies with my mom.”

The woman at the desk answered her phone after it buzzed. She looked over at us. “The Bishops will see you now. Conference room number three.” We got up, and she directed us with, “It’s through the doors, down the hall, and to your left.”

Maybe it was just a delayed reaction from having been shot at, but suddenly my legs weren’t working very well. Or maybe I suddenly realized that I was entering a room full of judgmental vampires and might never come out again. Either way, I had to clutch at Jessie’s arm to keep upright. I started trembling all over, and I was seeing spots behind my eyes.

“Aurora,” Jessie said in a very quiet voice, “you’re going to be all right.” He put his hand underneath my trembling chin and raised my head. “Look at me, Aurora. You have to trust me on this when I say, no matter what, you will be fine.” He was looking straight into my eyes. His eyes were so gray, like storm clouds in a dark sky, that I just had to believe him. I literally trusted him with my life.

Feeling steadier, I allowed him to lead me down the hall to conference room number three. Jessie reached up, and as he was about to knock, the door opened. “Come in,” said a silver-haired man wearing a well-cut blue pinstripe suit. “It’s nice to see you, Jessie.” He extended his hand, and Jessie shook it.

“Same here, Winston,” Jessie said. “May I present my fiancée, Miss Colette Gibson.” Then to me, he added, “Colette, this is Winston Hawthorn.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Winston said, taking my hand in both of his. “And none of the praise has been exaggerated.” He looked my face over carefully and then added, mostly to himself, “So young and fresh.” I felt like a recently slaughtered slab of veal on display in a butcher’s window.

“How do you do,” I said. It was the most old-fashioned thing I could think to say. If my life depended on being Colette, then I had damn well better try to be Colette.

“Come in.” Winston ushered us into the room. “We’re just waiting for a few more witnesses, and we’ll be ready to get started.”

There was a long, rectangular table in the center of the room with a variety of vampires sitting around it. Most of them were dressed like bankers, but there were one or two dressed in leather, trying to convey to the world that, even though they were undead, they still knew how to rock. There was a whiteboard on one wall and an overhead projector in the corner. I felt like I’d accidentally stumbled into a stockholders meeting.

“Have a seat,” Winston said, motioning toward a couple of empty chairs on the opposite side of the table from where most of the vampires were sitting. Jessie pulled out my chair for me. I’d never really taken a seat in front of him before, so I didn’t know if this was his habit or if it was all part of the “You’re Colette,” routine.

Winston addressed me directly. “Do you speak any Hungarian?” he asked.

“No, I’m sorry, but I don’t,” I replied. “I only found out I had to come here a few days ago.”

“Do not worry yourself,” he said, holding up a hand. “We can just as easily have the proceedings in English, if that would be a comfort to you.”

The idea of being on trial for my life was bad enough; not being able to understand a word was twice as horrible. "That would be great," I told him. "I'd really appreciate it."

"As you wish," he replied. Then, turning to the room, he cleared his throat. "Everyone, you all know Jessie. And this is his lovely human, Colette Gibson," Winston said, using game show hostess hands to show me off like a new car.

There were mumbled greetings from some of the Bishops. Jessie said hello to a few vampires by name. I had to sit there having them look me over, so I decided I might as well look back. None of them were exactly young, in the vampire sense. I was sure quite a few of them had been turned before their thirtieth birthdays, but they all appeared to have been vampires for a very long time. I was beginning to be able to gauge better who had been a vampire for a few decades and who had been a vampire for a couple of centuries. With the older ones, there was kind of a papery thinness to their flesh like with extreme vegans—when you meet them, all you want to do is jam a stick of butter in their mouths so that their skin doesn't start blowing off like ash from a burning log. Plus there was something about their eyes. Vampires' faces could still appear young, but it was hard to conceal hundreds of years of watching the world from their eyes.

At the far end of the table sat a vampire that looked both like a teenage girl and a centenarian. Her hair was lustrous and a youthful color of blonde; her flesh wasn't sagging like it does on old people, but there was something weird about her skin, something wrong. It was lumpy and a bit translucent, like the melting wax of a lit candle. I wondered about her. How old was she? I'd never seen a vampire that looked quite like her and, after the ball, I'd seen hundreds. If I had to guess, she was probably the head of the Bishops. In my mind, I thought of her as the mother of all vampires.

“Tell me,” said a vampiress who was wearing a suit and had her hair pulled back in a severe bun. “What does it feel like to be human?” She turned to the rock-n-roll vampire next to her and added, “It’s been so long that I can barely remember anymore.”

I tried to think of an answer. How did it feel to be human? But the vampiress went on chatting to her neighbor, completely ignoring me. It was obvious she only wanted to hear herself ask the question.

The door opened again, and in walked Madame Csorbo, the Duke, and three more vampires that I recognized from dinner. I shot a glance in Jessie’s direction, but he didn’t appear to be surprised or alarmed. Winston got up to greet them. He had a hushed conversation with Madame Csorbo, and then they all sat down in the remaining seats, leaving just one chair vacant.

“Shall we begin?” Winston asked, looking around the room. When no one protested, he turned to face us. “Jessie Vanderlind of the Vanderlind family, you are accused of killing a vampire for the sake of a human. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty due to extenuating circumstances,” was Jessie’s firm reply.

Winston turned his eyes to me. “Colette Gibson, human, you are accused of conspiring to kill a vampire for the sake of a human. How do you plead?”

I wanted to say, “Are you kidding?” Instead, I glanced at Jessie, causing him to reach over and take my hand, shaking his head with just the tiniest micromovement. I managed to pry the words, “Not guilty,” out of my lips.

“Please,” Winston said, turning back to Jessie. “In your own words, tell us what happened. How was Count Viktor Adami killed? Explain the extenuating circumstances.”

“It started at my maker’s day celebration,” Jessie began, getting to his feet. “Viktor took an unnatural interest in Colette. It wasn’t a feeding party, and I warned him that

Colette was under my protection, but he refused to listen. When he became disrespectful, he was ejected from the house.” Jessie took a long breath and ran his fingers through his hair a few times. “Later in the evening, he returned to cause more trouble, and I’m afraid it came to blows, but he refused to listen to reason. After that, I just assumed he’d sobered up and felt a bit embarrassed. But it turned out he felt his honor had been slighted, and he planned to revenge himself upon me by killing Colette. When I stepped forward to protect her, he made it very clear that he was willing to fight to the death. It could have just as easily been me who was killed, and then Viktor would have killed Colette as well.” He cast a steady glare around the room. “But I doubt his actions would have brought him to trial if our fates had been reversed.”

The vampires were all listening very attentively. “And why is this particular human of such value to you?” brought up the bunned vampiress who liked to hear herself ask questions.

“Colette and I are soul mates,” Jessie said with simplicity but also with a firmness that was in his voice as well as his posture.

“Ha!” said a vampire to the left of Winston. “You barely even knew her at the party.”

“At the time, I didn’t know Colette very well in her current manifestation,” Jessie told them, “but I felt an inexplicable need to protect her. We had previously fallen in love during her past life and had made the announcement that we intended to be conjoined. It was only her untimely death that kept us apart. That was until we met again on my maker’s day.”

“How do you know Colette is the reincarnation of the girl you loved before?” Winston asked.

“I feel it in every fiber of my being,” Jessie replied. “I knew it as soon as I saw her. We are connected in a way that defies a single human lifetime.”

“And you, girl,” said the ancient young woman with the waxy skin. She snapped her fingers at me like she was a rude patron trying to signal a waiter. “Do you believe you’ve been reincarnated?”

I looked at her and with all honesty replied, “I don’t know.”

Chapter 30

All the vampires stared at me like I was juggling hand grenades with the pins pulled. "You're fighting for your life, young lady," the ancient vampiress reminded me. "That's not a very good answer."

"Well, it's not a very good question, either," I fired back at her. Her eyes all but burned red, and I knew I was teetering on the edge of being killed on the spot. "I don't mean to be rude, but look at it from my perspective," I said, hoping to buy a few minutes to explain. "If I say no, then I'll be killed. If I say yes, you'll think I'm lying just to save my life. But I replied truthfully. I don't know if I've been reincarnated or not. Colette Gibson..." and then I hurriedly corrected myself, "the first Colette Gibson was my great, great aunt. Her sister, my great grandmother, is still alive, and she has told me my whole life that I look exactly like her lost sister." My voice started to sound a little shaky, so I took a moment to clear my throat. "Ever since I was a little girl, I've always been fascinated by the Vanderlind Castle. And my whole life, I've had these recurring dreams that never made any sense. It was only after I met Jessie and learned more about my namesake that I realized what I thought were dreams were probably past life memories."

“So you believe in reincarnation?” the old-young woman asked, a little skeptically.

“I guess I have to or you’ll rule against me, right?” I said in reply. The vampires all chuckled a bit at the truth of it. Before they could throw anymore questions at me, I continued with, “Here’s what I know to be true. When I first saw Jessie, there was this intense feeling deep inside of me. I’d never felt anything like it before. I can only describe it as someone plucking a harp string that had been still for many years. It was this vibrating emotion that woke me up in a way that I had never been awake before. But the more I’ve gotten to know Jessie, the more I’ve realized that we are truly connected in a way that I can’t explain with ordinary words. I don’t know if I’m Colette Gibson.” I hastily corrected myself again with, “I mean, the first Colette Gibson.” No one reacted, so I kept going. “I only know that the love I feel for Jessie has the power to last through time.” The vampires kept staring at me very impassively, so I finished with, “I’m not sure if that answers your questions, but it’s how I feel.”

“That was beautiful,” Winston said. “I swear the old heart almost started pumping again.” He chuckled, thumping his chest. “Do you have anything else you’d like to add?”

“I’m not sure,” I hedged, glancing over at Jessie. Everything was so informal, I wondered if it was the actual tribunal.

“It’s fine,” Winston assured me. Then turning to the Bishops, he said, “Let’s hear from the witnesses. Shall we?”

I gulped. The witnesses? Did he mean there were witnesses when Viktor got staked? Because if he did, then I was dead. There was no saving me.

“Madame Csorbo,” Winston said. “Would you please tell us what you have observed pertaining to Jessie Vanderlind and the human called Colette Gibson?”

The lady cleared her throat. “As many of you know, Jessie and his human have been staying at my house under

my protection while they are here in Budapest. It has not been easy. I have heard the rumors." She shot a sharp look across the room. I couldn't tell where it landed. "But I have known Jessie's mother for close to a century, and I felt it was only right."

"Go on, Madame Csorbo," Winston said. "Your loyalty and bravery are to be commended."

I felt like a rude jerk. Here Madame Csorbo had put herself and her family at risk, and I hadn't even so much as thanked her properly or anything. I wondered what you send a vampire as a thank you gift. Probably not a fruit basket.

"I have talked to the human girl. I used my influence over her. I compelled her to tell me the truth. I believe she loves the boy very deeply. She does not care that he is a vampire and she is a human. She wants to be with him." Madame Csorbo leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. "As for her being some reincarnation, I cannot say. I have no knowledge of reincarnation and found no proof that she is who she says she is." She leaned forward in her chair again. "But I have been compelling humans for many years. I would be able to tell if she was lying, and she is not. That much I know is true."

"Thank you for your testimony," Winston said. Then he turned to the Duke and asked for his observations.

The Duke and the other vampires said pretty much the same thing. They could tell I was sincerely in love with Jessie but couldn't tell if I was the reincarnation of the original girl Jessie loved. I couldn't even really remember talking to the other vampires much beyond accommodating them at the dinner party. They all swore that they had tried to compel me to admit that I wasn't truly in love with Jessie, but I had proven to them that I was. Apparently, every vampire in Budapest had been trying to mind meld me for the last twenty-four hours, and I hadn't realized it. Still, no evidence of reincarnation, though.

I had thought after Jessie and I spoke that the Bishops were leaning in our favor, but as the witnesses gave their observations, I couldn't tell for sure.

"Is that all the evidence?" the grand dame vampiress asked. "Is there no one here to speak for Count Adami?"

"I'm afraid not," Winston replied. I guess it was a good thing for me that most vampires also seemed to think Viktor was kind of a jerk. "But we do have one more witness that I am very eager to hear testify." I wracked my brain trying to think who else was in the lineup. Winston checked his watch. "She should be here soon, I hope. I hear there was a little ugliness on the way over, and she was delayed."

I froze at his words. *No*, I thought to myself, *he can't mean...*

Just then the door opened and in stalked Vilma. "Sorry I'm late," she said, slinking across the room and sliding herself into the last open chair. "I had to stop off for a bite."

Oh God, I thought. *I am totally dead meat.*

"As everyone knows, I am not a fan of these humans coming in and taking our men," was how Vilma began her testimony at Winston's prompting, waving a derogatory hand in my direction. "I don't condone companionism, let alone any vampire being insane enough to conjoin with a human."

I shifted my sitting position, and Jessie squeezed my hand under the table. No wonder Vilma had hated me before she'd even laid eyes on me. She just plain didn't like humans.

"Your feelings are understood," said Winston, "but would you please keep to your testimony and not allow your opinions to interfere with the facts."

"Fine," Vilma said with a sigh. "I used every ounce of my power to try to get Oh-I'm-So-Human over there to leave Jessie alone, but it was no use. The little nincompoop is sincerely in love with him."

“But is she the reincarnation of Jessie’s first human? The one to whom he had wanted to conjoin?” the grand dame snapped, obviously losing patience with the same testimony vampire after vampire.

“How am I supposed to know?” Vilma growled, tossing her hands in the air. “I tried to get that out of her, too, and she said she didn’t know anything beyond that she feels connected to Jessie, and she has some crazy dreams that are probably memories of the dead girl. I guess that could indicate a past life, but it’s hard to know for sure.”

“Do you have anything else you want to add?” Winston asked.

“I think they’re both idiots,” the vampiress replied. “She’s got a death wish, and he’s got a human fixation. But,” she continued, “I do believe they sincerely care for each other as much as they can given their circumstances, so maybe killing Viktor was a natural thing to do. Twisted and wrong, but understandable.”

“And what about the witness from the Vanderlind’s maker’s day party?” the senior vampiress asked. “He’s the one that started all of this. Why isn’t he here to give testimony?”

“He refused,” Winston told her. “He said giving testimony would jeopardize his standing in the community.”

“Coward,” Jessie hissed under his breath. I gave his hand a sharp squeeze to silence him. He was right; tattling but then not facing us was extreme cowardice, but Vilma’s testimony, although excessively bitchy, did put us in a good light. Maybe they would rule in our favor. I actually felt hopeful. It was hard, sitting in a conference room under the glare of fluorescent lights, to think they could actually order my execution.

Winston looked at the assembled Bishops. “Does anyone have any more questions before we deliberate?” When no one answered, he looked over at us and said,

“Okay, you’re excused. We shall summon you when we’ve made our decision.”

“That’s it?” I asked Jessie as vampires started getting to their feet to leave.

“Yes,” he nodded. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Something a little more formal, at least.” It felt like we’d just agreed to proceed with a business merger or something. Not at all like a vampire tribunal. It seemed like the worst they were going to do was deny me stock options.

As we headed through the lobby and back toward the elevators, Jessie pulled me to one side. “Would you mind waiting here for just one second?” He strode over to Vilma, who appeared to be waiting for him, and they had a quick, hushed conversation. I was listening very attentively and couldn’t pick up one single word.

As we headed over to the elevators, one of the doors was open, and there were quite a few vampires crowded inside. I could almost feel them sniffing my humanness. “We’ll wait for the next one,” Jessie told them, adding a little wave to keep it friendly.

It was just Vilma, Jessie, and me riding down to the lobby. I, for one, kept my mouth shut. Jessie and Vilma chose to do the same. As we exited the building, Jessie looked over at the vampiress. “So, we’ll hear from you soon?” Vilma nodded before signaling a black sedan that was waiting for her.

“Is that the way you expected things to go?” I asked, once we were alone.

“Not really,” he told me. “I thought the questioning would be a lot more intense. I thought they would pry a lot more into our lives to see what kind of relationship we had. It makes me nervous that they didn’t.”

“What do you think that means?”

He lifted his shoulders in a bewildered shrug. “I don’t know.”

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“We run,” Jessie replied, sweeping me into his arms and launching into the sky.

Chapter 31

Between the cold, my surprise, and the speed of Jessie's flight, I was having trouble catching my breath. He flew higher with me than he had ever flown before and faster than I realized was even possible. It was like being on one of those amusement park rides that uses centrifugal force. For a few seconds, everything was very blurry. But once we got high enough and I no longer had the buildings of Budapest as a frame of reference, it was a little less nauseating.

"Where are we going?" I managed to ask.

"A safe house," he told me, barely moving his lips he was so focused on making our getaway. "It's something I set up with Vilma. If it looks like things will go in our favor, we'll return. Otherwise, we'll already have a good head start."

"Vilma?" I exclaimed, doing very little to conceal my surprise.

"Yes. She'll contact me once she feels confident she knows the decision."

Of all the vampires in the world, Vilma would be on the top of my "don't trust" list. I couldn't say that to Jessie, though. He obviously trusted her with both our lives, and he'd known her a lot longer than I had. "If you say so," I told

him, trying to shrink down into my coat. It was damn cold out, hurtling through the night.

I don't know how long we flew. Maybe twenty minutes, maybe an hour. Jessie was focusing all his energy on flying as fast as he could and not letting me fall, I presumed, so I kept my mouth shut and tried to concentrate on not shivering to death.

Finally, I noticed we were starting to descend. I could make out silhouettes of the countryside, and it was a rocky, mountainous place. I didn't know where we were, but it was obviously a long way from the lights and bustle of Budapest. There was a river below us, so I asked, "Is that still the Danube?"

"Yes."

"Still?"

Jessie laughed. "The Danube is the second longest river in Europe. After the Volga, of course."

"Of course," I said, wishing I'd paid closer attention in geography class.

We approached a small town. Jessie came down very close to the road. From what I could make out, there were houses and various buildings lining the river and butting up against the mountains. Instead of landing, Jessie just floated a few inches above the ground as we went along. I felt like a ghost bride being carried over a threshold. "I can just as easily walk," I told him.

"No," he replied. "I don't want you to leave a scent trail."

"Oh." I resisted the urge to sniff my armpits. Well, if he wasn't going to let me walk, he could at least answer my next question. "Where are we?"

"Durnstein," Jessie said. After I gave him a blank stare, he added, "Austria."

"Austria?" I was a little stunned. I knew we'd traveled a long distance, but I didn't realize we'd left Hungary. "Jessie, I can't be in Austria. I left my passport back in my room."

Jessie chuckled. "You won't need it for the moment." He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. "Don't worry. We're almost there."

"Where?" I was tired, cold, and starting to feel a little annoyed.

"The castle," he said, nodding toward a distant peak above the town. Its top looked irregular, and I tried to see a castle but wasn't having much luck.

"There's a castle up there?" I asked, squinting into the dark.

"There used to be," Jessie admitted as we started floating up a steep incline of rocks piled upon each other. "Now there's mostly just a ruin."

"Why are we hiding in a ruined castle?" I had to ask.

"Because I knew you'd be disappointed by the Bishops' sterile office building. It was hardly romantic. And hiding in a ruined castle is very romantic," Jessie said, giving me a bit of a squeeze. "Plus I know a secret room in the castle, so I thought, why not?"

He knew me too well.

We started to ascend the side of a very old stone wall. From what I could tell by the light of the waning moon, there was moss growing in between irregularly shaped boulders. I looked up to see the ruining castle teetering above us. "Are you sure that thing is stable?" I asked. "It looks like it would fall over in a stiff breeze."

Jessie glanced up toward the Jenga tower of stones. "It's been around for about a thousand years, so it should last a couple more nights."

Eventually, we came to a large chink in the wall. It was not very tall but wider than a man. Jessie fed me through it like he was loading a pizza in an oven. "Step down," he told me.

Feeling around with my feet, I found the floor was only a few feet below me. The room was pitch black, so I just crouched there, trying not to flounder while Jessie floated in.

“What do you think?” Jessie’s voice came out of the inky darkness. He sounded pleased with himself and eager for praise.

“Of what?” I asked. I tentatively felt along the damp, cold stone floor and found what felt like a rug a foot away from where I was crouching.

“The room,” Jessie said, sounding a little exasperated by my thickness. It had been a long night for him, too, after all.

“Jessie, I can’t see the room,” I explained. “I can’t see my hand in front of my face. Is there a light you can turn on or something.”

“Oh,” he said, his voice much smaller as he realized his mistake. “I... I’m sorry, Aurora. I didn’t think about a light.” I felt hands upon me, which made me involuntarily flinch, but then I realized they were his. “I can go get one real quick,” he said, coaxing me to my feet and guiding me across the room.

“Don’t you dare leave me alone in here,” I told him. Even though I knew he’d hurry, he would still have to leave me for a few minutes, and that was a few minutes longer than I could take sitting alone in the pitch black of a ruined castle. “I’m telling you, I will freak out.”

“Shhh, it’s okay.” He hushed me. “I won’t leave you. There’s a couch right in front of you. I’m going to sit you down on it.”

I sat, finding the couch surprisingly low to the ground, and Jessie settled next to me, sliding his arms around me and snuggling me tight. I closed my eyes and tried to stop trembling. Jessie shifted around a bit and then pulled a blanket around me. From the nylon sound and feel of it, I assumed it was down filled. “I feel like a jerk about the light,” Jessie said in a quiet voice quite close to my ear. “I remembered food and water and this couch as a place for you to sleep, but a way for you to see never occurred to me.”

"It's okay," I assured him. "Most guys wouldn't even think to pack a few snacks. I'm safe and warm and with you. I can look at the room in the morning." I fought back a yawn. "Are you sure no one can find us here? German tourists aren't going to climb over a pile of rocks and wonder what we're doing here, are they?"

"No," Jessie replied, giving me a little squeeze. "Not unless they can lift a few tons of stone. The entrance to this room is blocked. That little fissure is the only way in or out."

His words echoed in my brain. "Jessie, don't you think there should be at least one other exit? I mean, what if we're attacked or something? Vampires could easily block off that hole in the wall."

"Okay, there is one more secret way out," he admitted, "but I don't think any humans know about it, and most vampires wouldn't realize it's there. You'd have to spend a lot of time flying around the castle to find it."

"Would you mind telling me how to find it?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, "but it would be impossible for you to use."

"Yeah, I understand that," I told him, "but what do I do if something happens to you? What if you take off somewhere and don't come back? How the hell would I get out of here?"

"Oh," he said. I couldn't see his face, but I assumed he was frowning. He shifted a little, and I knew he was running his fingers through his hair. "I guess you could always try to signal someone on the road. Wave a shirt or something. But I really don't think it'll come to that."

"I hope not," I said with a yawn. I wondered what time it was. It felt like I'd been awake for days. "Tell me how you know about this place," I said, cuddling against his chest.

Chapter 32

I'm sure Jessie probably answered me, but I didn't hear him. Sleep overcame me like a thick, pillowy fog, and I was not aware of a thing until I cracked open my eyes the next day. It took me a few minutes to remember where I was. I can't say the light was streaming in because the opening in the side of the castle wasn't that large, but the room was illuminated. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all made out of a gray stone. There was a couch, which I had been sleeping on. It had no legs, which explained why it felt so low when I sat down. Jessie probably had to remove the legs to get the couch into the small opening. I also spied a large cooler, which I assumed contained the food Jessie had mentioned, a table, two chairs, a small bookshelf piled with books, a bureau piled with dishes, and a screen with a potted plant in front of it. Further investigation showed that there was a travel commode behind the screen, along with some toilet paper, all of which I greatly appreciated.

In the far corner of the room was a large box that at first threw me off, and then I realized that Jessie was probably using it for the daylight hours. It wasn't exactly a coffin, but the thought of him lying in there, not moving, not

breathing, really gave me the creeps. I gathered the blanket around me and sat for a minute, wondering what to do next.

Thinking back, I counted the days since I'd left and came to the conclusion it was Saturday. My mom probably wasn't worried yet. She hadn't called my dad in a panic; she hadn't called the police in tears. The worst emotion she probably felt was annoyed with me for not calling on Thanksgiving. I had that excuse covered; I didn't bring my phone charger with me, so my phone was out of juice. That was, if I ever got home again to make the excuse. Thinking about my mom missing me made me feel very, very sad.

I decided that if I didn't do something, I would get quite depressed, so I opened the cooler and perused the treats Jessie had stocked for me. Lots of fruit, a large slab of ham, bottled water, croissant in a zip-locked bag, chocolate, two bottles of white wine, and a bottle of champagne all packed in ice.

Grabbing a croissant, I wandered over to the bureau to see what it had to offer. On the top there were plates, utensils, a carving knife, a corkscrew, glassware, and linen napkins. The bureau itself had three large and two small drawers, the smallest two being at the top and side-by-side, just like any other bureau. I decided to start at the bottom and opened the largest, lowest drawer first. On one side was a stack of pants and on the other was a set of flannel pajamas and a fleece robe. Next drawer up were sweaters, sweatshirts, and sweatpants. I guess Jessie wanted me to be warm and comfortable. The last of the larger drawers contained t-shirts, tops, and blouses. I opened the small top drawer on the left and found lacey underwear, camisoles, and bras. How did Jessie know my bra size? And why did he buy underwear with so much lace? I could feel myself blushing even with no one else around. I hesitated before pulling open the last drawer. What was possibly left? Hats? Scarves? Shoes? That seemed unlikely in one of the smaller

drawers. I eased it open, peeped inside, and breathed in a sharp, "He didn't." Although, obviously, he did.

The drawer was filled with hinged velvet boxes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Did Jessie really think I needed a selection of jewelry to hang out in the ruins of a castle? Still, I was excited like a little kid at Christmas. I wanted to tear through the drawer, pawing at everything, but I forced myself to go slowly. I had most of the day to fill, so there was no rush beyond my anticipation.

The first box, which I thought was a ring box, contained a pair of diamond stud earrings. I had always wanted a pair of diamond stud earrings, so this pleased me to no end. I knew I couldn't keep any of the jewelry, but I decided to just relax and enjoy playing with it for a while. The next box actually was a ring. A large, oval aquamarine set in white gold and surrounded by diamonds. It fit perfectly on my right hand ring finger. I went over to the hole in the wall to get a look at it in the sunlight. The stone danced and sparkled like the sun on the blue waters of the Caribbean. Or at least how I imagined the waters looked in the Caribbean.

Far below my little hideaway, I could see a road with a few cars going up and down. It would be awfully hard to signal anyone's attention way up here, I thought. Perhaps tourists came to the castle ruins and I could let them know I was trapped by shouting really loud. I didn't want to think about it, so I went back to the jewelry.

Besides the ring, there was also a matching pair of aquamarine and diamond earrings, a bracelet, necklace, and most perplexing of all, a tiara. Did Jessie really think I was going to need a tiara? That didn't stop me from trying it on, of course, and waving to the imaginary people lining the streets to see the princess and her procession on their way to the cathedral for the royal wedding.

There was also a choker of black pearls, a half dozen diamond rings, a diamond-encrusted compact, more

earrings, a citrine brooch that was really more fitting for my great grandmother, a gold cigarette lighter, and a very perplexing tiny gold tube with a ball on one end and a loop for suspending it off a chain on the other. When I pulled gently on the ball, it slid open and small gold tendrils slowly extended dancing around it. When I pushed the ball back in, the tendrils retracted into the body of the tube again.

What the heck was it? I really couldn't figure it out. I must have opened and closed it a hundred times and still was no closer to solving the mystery. I was half tempted to rap on Jessie's box and make him shout the answer out to me.

After a while, I put everything away but the tiara and the tube. After all, how often does a girl get to wear a tiara? It was pretty chilly in the ruins, so I put on the robe, had more to eat, and then started browsing through the books. Jessie had selected a mixture of classics and modern. At first I tried the modern, but found I couldn't concentrate from one page to the next, so I turned to the classics for something that was familiar. *Pride and Prejudice* fit the bill nicely. I'd already read it a few times, so I didn't really have to concentrate too closely. I opened one of the bottles of wine, got cozy on the couch, and prepared to get lost in the world of balls, gowns, carriages, and arranged marriages.

After a while, I got up and started wandering around. I somehow found my way out of the castle. I wasn't trapped there after all. There was a set of stairs that were surprisingly intact given the state of the rest of the place. All I had to do was just stroll down and out into the countryside.

It really was a beautiful day. The sun was shining but not too hot. The birds were singing, and butterflies were wafting about. I began to gather a small bouquet of wildflowers while the tall grasses pulled at the hem of my skirt. I was in a wonderful mood, made even better by the fact that he'd smiled at me. Mr. Vanderlind, the one they call Jessie, he had smiled at me and not just in friendly

acknowledgement of a servant passing through a room. The smile went all the way to his eyes. He had definitely smiled *at* me.

I heard a chuckle, and that roused me enough that I realized I had fallen asleep. Jessie was standing over the couch, looking down at me and smiling. "I thought you might like the tiara, but I didn't realize you'd be sleeping in it."

"Oh," I said groggily, my hands reaching up to remove the jewelry which had become pretty tangled in my hair. I had meant to put everything back before Jessie rose for the night, but I guess I had fallen asleep. "I'm sorry. I was just playing."

"That's why I got it for you," he said, appearing rather pleased.

"Huh?" I sat up, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. It was past sundown. I must have slept for a good chunk of the day. Hardly surprising, given the fact that my internal clock must have been ridiculously off.

"I was worried you'd be bored by yourself all day, so I thought you'd like something to play with," Jessie explained.

"Well, I did enjoy myself," I had to admit. Playing with gorgeous jewelry was not a bad way to spend an afternoon. "But seriously, Jessie, I can't keep any of it."

"Why not?" he asked, sounding a little put out.

"Well, assuming I get to go home at some point, how would I explain a diamond encrusted brooch to my mom? And what am I supposed to do with it, wear it on my jean jacket?"

"You're no fun," Jessie grumbled.

"Hey, wait a minute," I said, realizing something. "How can I see you?" It was dark outside, but our hideout was illuminated. I quickly scanned the room and realized there was a small lantern in a far corner of the room giving off a faint glow. "Where did that come from?" I demanded.

“When I got up, you were still asleep, so I took it from an obliging neighbor’s porch,” he admitted.

“You can’t go around stealing people’s lanterns.”

“I didn’t steal it,” Jessie told me. “Let’s just say the person involuntarily sold it to me.” Plunking down next to me on the couch, he asked, “Anything happen while I was resting?”

“What could happen?” I asked. When he only shrugged as his reply, I picked up the little gold wand and asked, “What is this?”

“What do you think it is?” he asked, his eyes sparkling with the anticipated pleasure of teasing me.

“Tell me or I’ll kill you,” I demanded. “It’s been making me nuts all day. I almost woke you up in your little box to ask you, so spill it right now.”

After having another chuckle at my frustration, Jessie said, “It’s a champagne stirrer. Or a champagne swizzle, whichever you prefer. It’s for getting the bubbles out of champagne.”

“Why would you want to get the bubbles out of champagne?” I asked. They were the best part.

“It used to be that the bubbles were more of an accident that happened during the fermentation process, so people wanted to get rid of them. Later, after it was decided the bubbles were a good thing, ladies would sometimes stir their champagne so the bubbles wouldn’t leave marks on their face powder.”

“Oh,” I said, extending and collapsing the swizzle a few times. “But why did you bring it here? Did you think I’d be worried about my powder?”

“No, but I thought you’d enjoy the mystery. I wanted something to keep your brain occupied so you wouldn’t worry too much about the inquest,” he said, slaying me with his gorgeous amused smile.

I wanted to raise some kind of protest, but it really had worked. I’d pretty much enjoyed my day in the ruins when I

wasn't thinking about Jessie in the box or being trapped there if he flew off somewhere and never returned. "How do you know me so well?" I had to wonder.

He shrugged. "I just do. I don't know if it's a Colette thing or..."

I cut him off with, "But what if I'm not Colette?"

"What?" He looked confused for a moment before adding. "I know you're not Colette."

"Yeah, but what if I'm not connected to Colette at all?" He looked even more confused, so I added, "I know I look like Colette and we are related and everything, but what if that's the end of it?"

Jessie shook his head. "I'm not sure what kind of answer you're looking for."

"I mean..." I paused. What did I mean? "Okay, you once told me that you first fell in love with Colette because she was kind. If you take away the fact that I look like Colette and sometimes have her memories, what do you like about me? Not as Colette, just as Aurora?"

"Well..." Jessie ran his hand through his hair a few times. "I'm not sure if anyone has ever told you this, but you're pretty feisty. You're brave and beautiful and determined. I can't imagine you ever giving up without a fight. I love all those things about you."

I had never actually thought of myself as any of those things, but I liked hearing them, especially from Jessie.

"You didn't abandon your friend," Jessie went on. "Not when she was unconscious at my maker's day party, not when you thought Viktor was holding her hostage, either. And did I mention you're beautiful?"

I was beginning to feel all glowy and warm. Leaning up against him, I sighed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said. "It's all the truth, just so you know."

I took a deep breath and asked, "So, do you think, even without all the Colette stuff, you'd still care about me?"

Jessie closed his eyes and nuzzled me a little before saying, "I know I would."

My heart swelled in my chest. He loved me. And not just because of the whole Colette connection, but actually me. It felt so good. It felt so wonderful. It felt... Oh, crap. *Sleepless in Seattle* somehow crept into my brain. I knew I would probably hate myself the second I said it, but I had to ask. "Jessie, if you care about me the way I care about you, what do you think Colette's reaction would be?"

"What?" Jessie pulled away from me slightly.

"I mean, if she knew about us, what would Colette think?"

At first, the look on Jessie's face was so heart wrenching that I wished I'd bit off my tongue rather than asked the question. But his expression quickly changed like a fast-moving storm rolling across the sky. He was hurt, then angry, then puzzled. His expression finally settled back to sanguine. "I think if she knew that she and I couldn't be together, then she'd want me to be with someone that makes me happy. She had a very generous spirit, and I'm sure that stayed with her, even after crossing over into whatever world comes after this one."

I blinked at him a few times. What he said made so much sense on so many levels. It was how I hoped I would feel when facing my own death. After all, the best outcome of our situation was that I would grow old and die. But Jessie would have to keep on living. "That was really lovely," I whispered. "I wish I could have known her. She sounds like a truly kind person. I wish I was that kind."

"You're kind," he assured me, leaning back in to brush his lips across my neck and causing an electric thrill to race up my body. "Personality wise, you're more like Lily, I think, but you're kind."

"Come out, come out, little vampire," said a laughing male voice from outside the gap in the castle wall. "And bring your human. It's time to pay the piper."

Without a second's hesitation, Jessie snatched me off the couch and whisked me through the air, around the screen, and up through a small hole in the ceiling that I hadn't previously noticed. The opening was so small that he had to keep me pressed against him lengthwise, his legs clamped against mine, and still my heel clipped against a rock. It hurt, and I would have cried out in pain, but Jessie clamped a hand over my mouth.

We had been plunged into the pitch black, and I couldn't tell what was going on. I only knew we were in a narrow space, and we were moving upward. The space restriction made it so Jessie couldn't go super fast. He had to negotiate us around some large rocks or broken bits of the castle, I couldn't tell. I guess then things opened up because we started picking up speed.

We burst from the top of the castle. I could see stars all around us and the lights from the town below. Then my view was abruptly eclipsed as something like a finely woven net, but heavier, was tossed over our heads. Jessie let out an unearthly cry of pain. He began writhing and howling, still holding on to me but desperately trying to push away the cloth. His skin was sizzling and burning away wherever the net touched him. Two vampires grabbed some ropes that were hanging off the net and started towing us through the air.

"Jessie, what the hell is it?" I yelled, not even sure if he could hear me over his own anguish.

Chapter 33

It took my brain a few seconds to click into gear before I realized the thing covering us was some kind of silver mesh, and it was burning Jessie's flesh. "Hold on," I shouted at him as I jerked off the robe I had put on over my clothes. "Get under this," I said, shoving the material between him and the silver. As soon as Jessie's skin was no longer touching the net, he stopped groaning. "Are you all right?" I asked, after he'd been quiet for several seconds. "Are you burned? Is this silver? Is that what's going on?"

"I'll heal," he said, his voice ragged with pain.

"So, you'll be all right?" I asked again.

He took a moment to answer. "I've failed you. I swore I would keep you safe."

"You didn't fail me," I insisted. "It was Vilma. She betrayed you. If you're going to blame anyone, blame her."

"No." Jessie shook his head under the robe, completely unwilling to even entertain the idea. "She would never do that. If she told anyone where we were, it's because they tortured her."

"Tortured her?" I said, feeling a sudden flash of anxiety for Vilma's wellbeing. "You don't think the Bishops would torture her, do you?"

“Aurora, we’re vampires,” he said ruefully. “I know we can come across as civilized with our business suits and office buildings, but never forget who we are.”

“Too right,” laughed one of the vampires who were towing us across the sky. He had obviously been listening to our conversation. Then, in a faux Transylvanian accent, he added, “Ve vant to suck your blood.” Both our captors laughed heartily as if the joke was incredibly original.

Jessie pulled me closer, and I tried not to cry. The Bishops had obviously ruled against us, and that was a death sentence for me and a century in a coffin for Jessie. “Will you ask them to kill me quick?” I whispered.

“What?” he asked, sounding shocked.

“I don’t want to be tortured,” I said into his ear. “If you can, will you please tell them to get it over quickly? And maybe let me send a letter to my mother before...” I couldn’t hold back and started sobbing in Jessie’s arms.

He ducked me under the robe with him and held me tightly, whispering into my hair. “Don’t give up yet, my darling. There’s still a chance. Don’t give up hope.”

After a while of sobbing under the robe without much oxygen, I had to stick my head out to get some fresh air. There was the double benefit of the blast of fresh air causing me to stop bawling. I took a look around. We were pretty high up, but I could tell we were following the Danube. It appeared that our vampire captors were flying us directly back to Budapest. They were both wearing heavy gloves, which explained how they were able to manage the silver net. I couldn’t believe with what casual enjoyment they were returning us to our doom. They were happily chatting to each other, just flying along as if they didn’t have two condemned people stuffed in a sack trailing behind them.

Jessie might not have believed that Vilma had betrayed us, but I knew the behavior of jealous females a lot better than he did, even vampire females. Soon she would be rid of me and maybe find a way to free Jessie from his

imprisonment after not too long. She would fabricate some excuse to tell Jessie about how we were discovered so easily and how our vampire captors knew of his secret exit. She didn't care about betraying anyone. I was quite sure the only thing Vilma cared about was making sure I was out of the picture.

Back in Budapest all too soon, the vampires landed on the roof of the Bishop building. They carried us into the building and kept us in the net while we rode in the elevator down to the thirteenth floor. There, outside the lobby, they finally deemed it safe to release us from the silver mesh. Jessie came out fighting, fangs bared, but the other vampires got the drop on him, pointing miniature crossbows at his chest.

I let out a little laugh when I saw the crossbows. The arrows they held were no bigger than well-sharpened pencils. It seemed ridiculous to have them flashing the things around like dangerous weapons, but Jessie didn't think so. "Come on," he said, taking me by the hand. "Let's hear what the Bishops have to say."

"Okay," I said, giving him a hesitant look. He probably wouldn't be killed, after all. It was only me facing the death sentence.

Jessie squeezed my hand and said in a low voice. "Don't give up hope. There's still a chance."

Looking into his endless gray eyes, I did feel a small flame of hope kindle in my belly. I couldn't help it. I knew it was foolish, but that was the way he made me feel. His skin had looked horrible in the harsh lighting of the elevator, like someone had brazed a raw slab of beef on a searing-hot barbeque grill. Since we'd exited the elevator, it looked vastly improved. More like Jessie had a bad sunburn that a permanent disfigurement. By the time we entered the lobby, Jessie had no signs of injury. His looks were back to being dizzying, but I wouldn't have cared if he had stayed maimed; I would have loved him anyway.

Waiting for us in the lobby were Madame Csorbo, the Duke, and I couldn't believe it but also Vilma. The fact that she had the nerve to show her face astounded me. I knew I was going to die anyway, so I thought I might as well give her a good slap across the face.

I darted forward, my hand raised, but Jessie must have anticipated me. Sweeping me aside in a gentle but firm motion, he said, "Vilma, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she sniffed. Then, glancing significantly in my direction, she added, "I can see you still haven't regained your senses."

Jessie didn't seem to be picking up on what she meant. "Did they torture you?" he asked, scanning her from head to toe. "How did the Bishops know where we were? How did they find us so quickly?"

"I told them," she said with a sniff that might have been to conceal a small chuckle. "Don't be so simple, Jessie. You killed our brother. You have to face the punishment for your crime."

Jessie's jaw literally fell open. I saw the full understanding of the betrayal cross his face.

"You can go in now," the receptionist told us, motioning toward the hallway and the conference rooms.

I grabbed Jessie's arm and tried to roust him from his fog. If we were going to try to run again, we really should have tried right then. But he just kept walking. My legs were trembling, and I was on the verge of panic. We had to get out of there. We had to at least try to make a break for it. But Jessie wasn't with me. He wasn't thinking about the future. He was lost in what Vilma had done. I knew that if I tried to escape by myself, it would only end with the vampires tearing me to pieces and feasting on my body. My only hope was to beg the Bishops for a quick death.

Chapter 34

“Jessie Vanderlind of the Vanderlind Family,” Winston said, reading out our sentences. We had been ushered back into conference room three, Jessie still stunned, me still panicking, no one else giving a damn. All the Bishops were back again, in their same seats, staring at us with their impassive eyes. Before each of them was a gold chalice. I could only imagine they were all filled with blood. It made my stomach shrivel. Turning to me, Winston added, “And Colette Gibson, human. You have been found guilty of killing Count Viktor Adami to spare a human life.”

“Are you kidding?” The words escaped from my lips. “That’s not fair. Viktor was an asshole. This isn’t justice.”

“Just wait, you little fool!” snapped the matriarch vampiress. “If you’d only keep your mouth shut, I think you’ll be satisfied with the ruling.”

Winston cleared his throat after shooting me an annoyed look. “Due to extenuating circumstances, this court has determined that today will be Colette Gibson’s maker’s day. No other amends will be required.”

“Here’s to Colette Gibson becoming one of the chosen,” the vampiress with the bun said. All of the Bishops raised their goblets in a toast, smiling and nodding at me.

“No!” Jessie roared, his voice filling the room.

“Jessie, what’s going on?” I turned to look at him, but he was too focused on the vampires.

“You can’t do this!” he shouted at the Bishops. “You can’t turn her. She’s not made to be one of us. It’s not right.”

“Our decision is final,” Winston said, his words rather clipped. He’d obviously expected a different reaction.

“Jessie?” I asked again. I wasn’t sure if I completely understood what they were talking about, but I had the feeling they had just announced they were about to turn me into one of the undead.

“Don’t do this,” Jessie pleaded, turning to the Bishops’ matriarch. “You can’t do this.” He fell to his knees and bent his head in a posture of extreme supplication. “I’m begging you. Don’t change her. It would destroy who she is. It would obliterate everything I love about her. Please, take me instead. Lock me in a coffin for a thousand years. Stake me and send me to my final end. I don’t care what you do to me, but please spare Colette.”

“Jessie, no!” I tried to stop him. He couldn’t offer his life. Not to spare mine. “It’s not worth it. Just let them make me a vampire.”

He whipped his head around and stared at me, pain and anger etched across his face. “Be quiet. I know what I’m doing.”

Winston was a little wide eyed, goggling in surprise at Jessie. “You’d really rather die at the stake than have your human become one of us?” he asked.

“A thousand times over,” Jessie assured him.

The matriarch vampiress sighed. “That was very romantic, young man,” she said. “But are you sure you know what you’re agreeing to?” She shifted her gaze to look at me. “This is actually quite an honor for the young lady.”

“You can’t kill him,” I said, somehow finding my voice, even though inside my head I was screaming. “I’ll do what you want. I’ll become a vampire if I have to. Just don’t kill

him. Don't lock him away." The whole room shifted a little. Those obviously weren't the words they expected to come out of my mouth. They thought being killed and then brought back as the undead was an honor.

Jessie turned to look at me again. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do," I told him. "I won't let you do it. I can't let you do it. If you die, they might as well kill me, too. My life will be over."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Jessie insisted, his gray eyes the color of the Atlantic during a perfect storm. "This isn't the life for you. There's so much you don't understand."

"I understand that I love you," I insisted. "I understand that if you died for me that my heart would be broken. I mean, forever broken. You know how that feels. You know what I'm talking about." Jessie had mourned for the real Colette Gibson for close to eight decades. He couldn't tell me I'd get over him being staked for my sake.

"Madame Bishop?" I said to get the matriarch's attention. We hadn't been introduced so I didn't know exactly how to address her. "I'm happy to become a vampire," I told her. "I know Jessie doesn't think it's right, but I'll get to spend eternity with him, so that's fine by me," I said. "I would very much like to accept the honor of November thirtieth being my maker's day. But I have a request, if it is not too presumptuous for me to ask." I knew I was being very presumptuous, but hell, they were about to turn me into a vampire, I had to try something.

The matriarch nodded. "Go on."

"I'm only seventeen," I told them. "Human years, of course, but still, that's pretty young by modern American standards." Jessie just stared at me, eyes wide, his perfect lips parted in a small "o" almost like a kiss from a child. No one else said anything, so I took a deep breath and kept

going. "In the Vanderlind family, it's a tradition that family members aren't turned until they are twenty-four."

"But you're not a family member." Vilma all but hissed at me, there was so much venom in her voice.

"I know," I told her before continuing to address the entire room. "But I will be a family member when I marry Jessie." I raised my left hand, letting the enormous engagement ring sparkle in the fluorescent lighting. "And I also know that after Jessie and Daniel, there are no more Vanderlinds left. They are the last of their line." My statement caused some whispering amongst the vampires. "I'm not arguing about being turned," I told them. Giving a small bow toward the head vampiress, I said, "I think it's the right thing for Jessie and my relationship." A small smile flitted across her lips, and I had the feeling that she had argued in my favor. "I'm asking for a delay until I'm twenty-four. That gives me an opportunity to grow up a little." I reached over and took Jessie's hand. "And it also gives us a chance to try to have a child."

"You can't have a child!" Vilma leapt to her feet. "It is impossible. Vampires cannot bear children!"

"But humans can," I insisted. "And modern scientists are doing remarkable things with fertility. Did you know that Japanese doctors are on the verge of cloning a woolly mammoth using frozen DNA? They think within five years we're actually going to have mammoths again using an elephant as a surrogate mother." This was news to the vampires. They all just gaped at me. "What I want to know," I continued, "is why can't we do this with vampire DNA? With the right doctor and a few more advances in technology, why couldn't I have Jessie's child?"

Even Jessie turned to look at me, completely flabbergasted. "Do you think it's really possible?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said in complete honesty. "I'm not a scientist. But I think it's worth trying. Don't you?"

There was some grumbling amongst the vampires. No one looked completely convinced. I had the feeling that several of them would have been happy to leap onto the table and suck all the blood out of me at that exact moment. I was about to say a bit more about DNA, but Jessie superseded me. "Look at it this way, it's only seven more years," he told the other vampires. "And if it works, it's a way to extend family lines that we thought had come to an end."

"I think this is something we should discuss amongst ourselves," the matriarch said. "You may wait in the lobby until we reach our decision."

Jessie rose and then took my arm to help me to my feet. I felt stunned, like I was superimposed on the scene rather than actually functioning in it. The idea of being turned into a vampire was only slightly less frightening than being outright killed. The thought of drinking human blood to stay alive was pretty damn repugnant. Where would I live? How would I survive? What would I tell my mom?

As Jessie guided me out of the room, I heard the matriarch say, "I meant *all* of you need to wait in the lobby." Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed that Vilma had tried to stay in her seat, obviously keen to contribute her two cents to the debate. She reluctantly got to her feet and followed us out the door.

In the lobby, Jessie settled me into one of the chairs. I felt a wave of panic. There was a very good chance that I was on the verge of becoming a vampire, and I needed to know what would happen to me if the Bishops went through with their plan. "Jessie," I said, looking up.

He bent and kissed me on the forehead. "I think you've done it," he breathed in my ear. "Just try to stay calm, and we'll see what they have to say."

"But, Jessie..." I said, my lips trembling.

"I need to have a word with my dear friend Vilma," he told me. "Do you think you'll be all right on your own for a minute?" I nodded, too stunned to say no, and Jessie gave

my shoulder a little squeeze before striding over to the loveseat where Vilma had flung herself, one leg hooked over the armrest.

Jessie started the conversation, saying something in a low voice that I couldn't catch. Vilma responded with, "Well, I wasn't going to have you making a fool out of yourself for the next fifty years. I'd have drained her myself before I let that happen."

I sincerely wished there was another human in the room so I could catch their gaze and roll my eyes. Vampires were so convinced of their own superiority it was annoying. Then I remembered what that other human had said to me in the ladies room at the vampire ball and felt a momentary urge to snicker.

There was a beeping sound, and the receptionist picked up her phone. "You can go back in now," she announced, so we all got up and shuffled back down to the conference room.

"Congratulations," Winston said to me after we were all in the room. "It looks like not only will you be a vampire, but you will have the chance to become a mother. Your maker's day will be on November thirtieth of your twenty-fourth year."

I didn't know if I should jump for joy or burst into tears. I turned to look at Jessie, but he only gave me an encouraging nod. "Thank you," I said, trying to appear honored or pleased or something besides a little nauseated.

"And starting now, Colette Gibson will be accorded the same respect and benefits as if she was already made," the grand vampiress announced.

"You've got to be kidding." Vilma growled.

"Let it be known that anyone who does not treat her with the respect she deserves shall have to deal with me personally," the matriarch went on, unleashing a fiery look in Vilma's direction. "She will, after all, one day be the mother of a Vanderlind."

The next thing I knew, we were all out on the sidewalk. "What just happened?" I breathed the question into Jessie's ear as we walked out the door of the building, our arms entwined. He responded by shooting me a look and giving my arm a squeeze.

"Would you like to catch a ride with us?" Madame Csorbo asked as a limousine pulled up to the curb.

"No, thank you," Jessie told her. "I think we'll fly back. Colette and I have a lot to talk about."

After the others had piled into the car, Jessie led me down the street. We walked along for a few blocks without speaking. I had no idea what time it was, but the streets of Budapest were empty but for us. "What did you want to talk about?" I asked after about the fifth block.

Jessie turned and looked behind us. No one was there. He looked to the left and right. We were all alone. Then he cracked into the most dazzling smile I'd ever seen. "You did it, Aurora," he said, sweeping me into his arms. "You did it!" he shouted, launching us into the air.

We went swooping and barrel rolling through the sky with Jessie laughing and me holding on for dear life. "Jessie, whatever I did I'm glad you're happy, but I really don't want to throw up," I told him.

Jessie settled us on the roof of a tall building, him sitting on the ledge with me in his lap. He kept kissing my cheek again and again, and then squeezing me tight. "Okay, okay, I get it, I did it," I told him, "but would you please explain what I did?"

"You tricked the Bishops into letting you live," he said, joy dancing in his gray eyes.

"I did?" I was confused. "I thought they just agreed to let me stay human until I'm twenty-four and then it's vampire time."

Jessie laughed in delight. "But don't you see, vampires have no real concept of time. Not the really old vampires. Not the Bishops. It's nothing to them. They'll mean to have

someone check up on you in seven years, but by the time they think of it, a good thirty or forty years will have passed. And by the time they actually send someone to America to check on you, you'll be in your sixties. And they'll be looking for Colette Gibson not Aurora Keys. Probably by the time they find you, you'll be seventy or eighty and none of this will matter," he said, chuckling so gleefully he had to kick his feet in the air like a child.

"But..." I tried to absorb what he had just told me. I didn't have to become a vampire. That was a relief. But that also meant that I would grow old. And Jessie would stay seventeen. "Don't you want to be with me?" I asked. "Don't you want us to be together?"

"Of course, I do," he said. Looking deep into his fathomless gray eyes, I could tell he was sincere. "I want it more than anything in the world," he insisted. He set me down next to him, but kept his arms around me. "I love you, Aurora. And I don't love selfishly. Not anymore." His eyes grew distant for a moment, and then he looked back at me. "I should have never asked Colette to run away with me. That was selfish. That was wrong. I should have thought of her safety first instead of my own feelings. That's what true love is—when you care about the other person more than you care about yourself. You see that with a mother for a child. You see that with humans that have been together for fifty years."

I interrupted him with, "But if I was a vampire, we could be together forever."

"Oh, Aurora." Jessie sighed, leaning in and kissing me gently on the lips. "Spending my life with you would be the best thing I could imagine. But you don't understand what it is to become a vampire. It can change you into something unrecognizable to anyone who knows or loves you. There's a chance it would change who you are in a way that you can't even conceive of right now." He shook his head quite

adamantly. "I would hate that for you. It would kill me to see you change the way some vampires do."

"Okay," I said slowly. "I think I understand." But then I had to blurt, "I just hate thinking about how things are going to be when I'm Grandma Gibson's age and you're still..." I waved a hand at his handsome face, his perfect body, "you."

Jessie closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against mine. "Can we just count our blessings for tonight and be thankful that we got you out of there with your heart still pumping?"

"Yes," I said, breathing in the citrus-cloved scent of him. "We can do that." I was happy. I would have been happy to sit on that rooftop with Jessie's arms around me for the rest of my life.

"I should probably get you back to the villa so you can get some sleep," he said, nuzzling my hair. "After all, we have a flight to catch tomorrow."

"Sleep?" I could tell I was tired, but sleep sounded like such an alien concept after everything we'd been through.

"I know," Jessie said. "I want to fly you to the moon or... I don't even know. We should at least do something to celebrate. Is there anything I can do for you? Or... buy you or anything that would make you happy?" he asked, his gray eyes so warm and earnest.

"I am happy," I insisted.

"Me, too, but is there a way I can make you even happier?" he asked.

I thought about it. "Well, there is something you could do that isn't exactly for me, but it would make me very, very happy," I told him.

Jessie narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but a grin played across his full lips. "What?"

Chapter 35

"I can never stop thanking you," Gloria said for what felt like the seven hundredth time.

"Could you maybe thank me by stopping thanking me?" I asked. She had to stop at some point.

"You just don't know what this means to me," she said, crouching by my seat in first class, blocking most of the aisle. It had been too late to get her a seat in anything but coach. The flight attendant had already asked her to return to her seat a couple of times, but she kept coming back to thank me again.

"Yes, I do," I told her. "That's why I asked Jessie to do it."

"But I can't believe it. I'm going to see Viggo in just a few hours. I can't believe it. I can't believe you did this for us." Gloria swooped in and gave me a hug. The first time she'd done it, back at the Csorbos' mansion, it felt like a very non-Gloria thing to do, but I was getting used to her hugs.

I'd originally asked if Jessie could buy Gloria's freedom. I knew it was probably a ridiculous amount of money, but I thought I'd ask. Jessie was a little surprised. I'm not sure he expected me to ask for something so costly and

for somebody else. And the Csorbos, of course, didn't want to give her up. I'd fallen asleep while Jessie kept negotiating and only woke up with Gloria bursting into my room and then bursting into tears of joy.

Jessie hadn't managed to free Gloria from her debt. There was some nonsense about vampire law and the proper way for a human debt to be repaid, blah, blah, blah, but he was able to buy out her debt so that she could come to America and serve the Vanderlinds. It wasn't freedom, but she would be able to be with the man she loved, so it was the best I could do for her. And she was pretty happy about it, or so I gathered from her constantly wandering into first class to thank me again and again. I finally just feigned sleep and wouldn't react, no matter how much she "accidentally" prodded me.

I wanted to do something to help Margaret as well, but didn't know too much about her beyond that she was very nice and worked for vampires. I finally asked Jessie if I could give her the moonstone necklace he had given me for the ball. At first he was hurt, until I explained that, "I think it's the most beautiful thing in the world, but you know I can't keep it. My mom would find it in my room sometime, and then how would I explain things?"

Jessie narrowed his eyes at me but finally relented with, "Okay, fine. We'll give it to Margaret. But you let her know she's a fool if she sells it for anything less than twenty-thousand Euros." He changed his mind, almost instantly, and said, "No, wait. You can still give it to her, but I want to be the one that talks to her about it." He wouldn't tell me why, but I had to agree. It was his necklace, after all.

Madame Csorbo was genuinely sad to see Gloria leave, and not just because a good servant is hard to find. She made a point of getting up from her coffin to see us off. As we were about to head out the door, she gave Gloria a big hug, and I swear there were tears in her eyes. Vilma did not make an appearance, which was a relief. I wasn't sure I could

have been gracious, even though she did, to some degree, testify on our behalf.

Once I got Gloria to leave me alone, I had some time to think about Jessie and what he'd told me about when people turned into vampires. I'd met quite a few vampires by that time, and more than a handful of them were real jerks. I had just assumed that they were jerky when they were alive and that being undead hadn't improved the situation, but maybe that wasn't the truth. Maybe most of them were originally nice people who had just become distorted after turning vampire. It was hard to picture someone like Vilma as ever being pleasant, but it wasn't completely impossible.

Jessie was still the nicest and most generous person, human or vampire, that I had ever met. I didn't know his mom very well, but she seemed pretty pleasant, and she obviously loved her children very much because she had tried very hard to save them from being turned into vampires by her own father. But Jessie's brother, Daniel, was a complete ass. He came off as a stereotypical spoiled and selfish first-born son. Or at least that's how they were always portrayed in romance novels. If I did end up having to go vampire at twenty-four, I wondered what kind of bloodsucker I would be.

I had to check Jessie's coffin in at the airport and that was bizarre. It made sense to repatriate the body of a Hungarian back to his homeland, but it didn't make sense to still have him with me on the return flight. The woman behind the ticket counter didn't even bat an eye as I mumbled some excuse about the cemetery not accepting the body and my family deciding it was better to bury Grandpa Vanderlind back home. I guess, seeing that Budapest had such a large vampire population, they had a lot of bodies flying in and out. I was very nervous anyway, but fortunately I had Gloria there to walk me through it.

As I tried to relax in my first class seat and get into the rhythm of the flight, I thought about how there was still so much I didn't know about being a vampire—like did they sleep during the day or was Jessie just lying awake in there looking at the inside of his coffin's lid. Picturing him motionless and alone in a box made me frightened somehow, but also sad. I reached into my bag and fished out the envelope where I kept Jessie's picture. Or at least, what used to be his picture. Jessie was no longer there. It was just me, grinning like an idiot, with a small orb that looked like a soap bubble floating near my head.

Going through customs and changing planes was just a lot of standing in line. Gloria had to go through a different line, seeing that she wasn't a U.S. citizen. I had no idea how Jessie got her a visa so fast, and I probably didn't want to know. It was nerve-wracking enough going through passport control with my own fake identification.

As the wheels of our plane touched down in Cleveland, I started shaking and had to fight back tears. I couldn't believe I'd made it back alive. We'd made it back together. I was still breathing, and Jessie wasn't imprisoned somewhere. The woman in the window seat next to me patted my hand and said, "I know how you feel. I just hate to fly."

Viggo was waiting for us at baggage claim. He picked Gloria up and swung her around, almost clocking a few other passengers with her heels. They were both laughing and crying and couldn't stop hugging each other. Then the giant gave me a turn, spinning me around baggage claim. "I had hoped you would bring me back a letter," Viggo said, "but this is much better. You are a vonderful girl, Miss Aurora. I vill never forget how vonderful you are."

Viggo offered to have someone drive my car back to Tiburon for me so I could ride with Jessie, but seeing that he was still in his box and that Gloria obviously wanted time alone with her giant, I said, "No, thanks. My mom will freak if someone else shows up in my car."

I kept the Polaroid on the dashboard of my car as I drove back to Tiburon. I couldn't stop looking at it, the absence of Jessie's face. I was convinced he would say it was nothing, but I was starting to know Mr. Vanderlind better than that.

"You're home," my mom called out as I dragged my bags in from the garage after parking my car.

"Mom," I said, trying to keep my emotions under control. When I'd left five days earlier, I was convinced that I'd never see my mother again. Swallowing a bunch of different words that rose to my lips, I finally managed to say, "How's Grandma Gibson?" I had to confess that I'd almost forgotten about my great grandmother's illness as I was facing down vampires and fleeing for my life.

"Good," Mom replied. "She's out of the hospital. She's been asking for you about every other second, but besides that she seems fine."

"Asking for me or asking for her sister?" I wanted to know.

"You, actually," Mom told me. "I know it sounds like a pain, but maybe you could swing by the home after school tomorrow. If you left right from school, you could make it for visiting hours, and I know it would make her feel a lot better."

"Okay," I agreed. After facing a tribunal of vampires, dealing with my future-predicting great grandmother didn't sound all that intimidating.

"How was it at your dad's? Did you have fun? Did Tammy give you any trouble?" Mom asked. She was probably champing at the bit to find out, but Grandma came first.

I decided the hell with it, threw my bags on the ground, and wrapped my arms around her. "I'm so sorry I went," I said, my voice quavering. "Tammy is a giant bitch, and Dad never, ever deserved a woman as awesome as you."

“Oh, thank you, sweetie,” Mom said. I was crying, and I could tell that she was crying a bit, too. I felt so horrible that I’d had to hurt her, but it felt so good to be home. “You never called. I was getting worried. If you weren’t back by six, I was going to call your dad.”

“Wow, you must have been worried,” I said with a laugh, giving her another squeeze and then breaking our hug so I could wipe my nose. “I’m sorry I didn’t call, but I left my charger here, and my phone ran out of juice. I guess I could have asked Dad if I could use their phone, but…”

“Don’t even worry about it,” Mom said, dabbing at her eyes. “I’m just glad you’re back safe. I’m sorry you didn’t have a very good time.”

“It wasn’t that horrible,” I said. “Tammy’s still psycho, and Dad’s, you know, Dad. I just kept wishing I’d stayed here and was having dinner with you and Aunt Sue.”

“Yeah, me too,” Mom admitted. “But I think it’s good you went.”

“Probably.” I nodded, turning my head to hide a small smirk.

“Now, don’t get all spoiled or anything, but I made all your favorite foods for dinner,” Mom told me.

“No leftover turkey?” I asked half wistfully. I’d completely missed the big meal, after all.

“No, but there’s half a pumpkin pie in the fridge that I saved for you.”

“Whipped cream in the can?” I asked.

Mom smiled. “Would I torture you with anything else?”

“I hope not.”

“Do you want a slice now?” she asked. “Because I want to hear all about what your father is up to.”

“I would love a slice now,” I told her. Eating a huge slice of pie smothered in canned dairy sounded perfect. “But do we have to talk about the whole dad thing now? I kind of want to ignore it for a bit if you don’t mind.”

Mom shrugged, a bit perplexed. "I guess I don't mind, but are you sure you're all right? I mean, nothing bad happened, did it? You know you can tell me anything, right?" she said, immediately donning her therapist hat.

"I know," I assured her, sticking my head in the fridge to hunt for the pie. "I've just thought about the whole dad thing so much in the last week that I'm just kind of sick of it. You know what I mean? You were right, I have a crappy dad, but I've decided it isn't the end of the world." I pulled the pie out and grabbed the can of whipped cream. "I mean, that's okay. Life is still good."

"Okay," Mom said, nodding her head, seemingly convinced. "So... do you want to...?" She left the words hanging out there.

"Eat food, lounge on the couch, and watch movies with my mommy? Yes, please!" I said, giving her a big smile. Just relaxing and being with Mom was about the best thing I could imagine at that moment.

"You got it," she told me, "but I'm going to need a piece of that pie."

Chapter 36

By eight-thirty, I was falling asleep on the couch. Mom gave me a nudge. "You're tired. Didn't you get any sleep at your dad's?"

"Not really," I told her. "Tammy was too annoying." I staggered to my feet. "I think I'm going to unpack and go to bed," I said, giving her a light kiss on the head.

"I'm glad you're home, sweetie," she called after me as I headed for the stairs.

"I'm glad I'm home, too," I called back. And I really meant it.

Upstairs, I splashed some cold water on my face to try to wake up. Jessie would be by soon, and I didn't want to sleep through his visit. I unzipped my bags and started pulling things out for the laundry. Tucked between my jeans and my pajamas some shiny paper caught my eye. Puzzled, I pulled it out. I hadn't realized I'd brought anything home with me that I hadn't had when I'd started out. My ship hat had been lost; my ocean blue dress was a bit stained and way too big to sneak into the house; all the jewels in the castle had been left behind when we tried to escape. I wondered what would happen to them.

But that brought me back to the festively wrapped package. It was about the size of a salad plate and only a few inches tall. I tore it open to find the velvet clamshell box with the moonstone necklace inside. My heart skipped a beat after I opened it; the necklace was so pretty. But I was glad I didn't realize I had it when going through customs, or I probably would have been sweating a lot more. There was a note tucked in with the necklace, which I snatched up with greedy fingers. It read:

My Dearest Aurora,

I can't imagine anyone wearing this but you. I spoke to Margaret about it, and she has been fairly compensated.

*All of my love,
Jessie*

I gave a wistful sigh and pressed one of the gemstones to my lips. It felt cool and smooth and magical. I did dearly love the necklace and had sincerely hated to give it up. Jessie must have sensed that. He was truly the most generous man I had ever met. I hoped Margaret was able to put the money to good use.

Still, I was going to have to find a place to hide the necklace and my engagement ring. Plus I had no idea what to do with the passport and the Euros that I'd never had time to spend. I was puzzling out the dilemma when there was a gentle tapping at my bedroom window. I pulled back the curtain to reveal Jessie, standing tall and beautiful while the wind blew his long coat around his legs.

As soon as our eyes met, he broke into a smile. Just seeing him filled me with such elation that I practically tore the window open to get to him. He started to say, "Good even..." but I launched myself into his arms with such

intensity that he had to focus on not falling over rather than wishing me a pleasant evening.

I hadn't planned to attack him, but I couldn't stop myself from wrapping my body around his and kissing him with a fierce intensity. Our tongues found each other, mine warm and his cool. Our hands roved over each other's bodies, tugging on hair and caressing each other's torsos. His forearm grazed along the side of my breast and I let out a small whimper of pleasure. Clothing became an obstacle that I could no longer tolerate, and I began fumbling at the buttons on his shirt, I was so eager to feel his flesh against mine.

"Aurora, we need to stop," he said, trying to still my fevered fingers.

"No, we don't," I insisted. "We're engaged, remember?"

He tried to counter with, "We're not that kind of engaged."

"I don't care," I insisted, dragging my lips along his neck and then nipping at his earlobe causing him to inhale sharply. "We made it. We're free. We can be together."

"Aurora," Jessie said firmly as he captured my hands in his, "would you please listen to me for a minute? We need to talk."

I looked into his beautiful gray eyes and saw the pain there, it was so plainly written. "No," I told him. "We don't."

"No, we really do," he insisted.

"No, we really don't," I informed him. I knew what he was thinking, and I wasn't having any of it.

"Aurora, listen," Jessie said, taking a step backward to create some distance between us.

"No, you listen," I countered. "Do you really think I don't know what you have planned?" I pulled the Polaroid out of my back pocket and flipped it at him. Then, lowering my voice in a bad imitation of him, I said, "Aurora, I care about you, but we can't be together." I put the back of my

hand dramatically over my eyes and tilted my chin up. "I love you, and I would risk my life to save yours, but now that you are safe, I realize that I am putting you in danger. It's best that I end things now so that you'll be miserable and I can go off and pine for you from a distance like Heathcliff out on the moors. That will be so much healthier and happier for both of us." I flashed him a dangerous look and asked in my normal voice, "Is that about what you had in mind?"

Jessie's mouth fell open. "I..." He couldn't quite finish his thought. Running his hand through his hair a few times, he tried again from a different angle. "You..." But he didn't get very far that way, either. I just stared at him, defiantly, daring him with my eyes to try anymore of his noble, self-sacrificing nonsense. Finally, he broke into a laugh and said, "I do not sound like that."

"You kind of do."

Jessie picked up the photograph from where it had landed on the roof. "Oh," he said frowning. "That's too bad. I was hoping I would stay in this one."

"Yeah, well, I think it was a pretty good hint that you were going to try to dump me again."

"I wasn't going to dump you," he insisted. When I gave him a flat look, he said, "Okay, I thought that maybe it would be a better idea if I left you alone so you could have a normal life. But I wouldn't have said it like that."

I was in love with a vampire; I had no idea how I was supposed to have a normal life. "How would you have said it?" I asked, reaching out to take his hand to tug him closer to me.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head, still flabbergasted that I had so easily seen through his plan. "I probably would have said, 'No matter where you go, no matter what separates us, you will always have my heart,' or something like that."

"That's beautiful," I told him. "Completely stupid and unnecessary, but beautiful."

"But," Jessie began.

"No," I told him again. "Jessie, you're going to listen to me," I said in as firm of a voice as I could muster. "You are not allowed to wander off and be all noble and self-sacrificing like you like to do. I know you think it's something you have to do for my sake, but it really only makes us both miserable. And we'll only end up back together anyway, you have to know that." I lifted my arms and wrapped them around his neck.

Jessie let out an exasperated sigh. "I know, but..."

"No buts," I told him. "You're not the only one who gets a say in our relationship. I know where you live, and I will stalk you if you try any of your vampire nonsense again. You know Viggo will let me in."

It was impossible for Jessie not to laugh. "You know, I think he would."

"I know he would," I informed him.

Knitting his dark eyebrows together, Jessie said, "So what do we do? Where do we go from here?"

"We be together."

"But how?" he wanted to know.

"We date," I said simply. "We go out on Saturday nights. You come over and meet my mom." I could tell he was about to protest, but I stopped him by repeating, "I invite you over to my house and you meet my mother like normal teenagers do."

"So that's what you want?" he asked, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist and snugging me to him.

"Yes," I told him, tilting my head up slightly. "I've never wanted anything more in my life."

And then he kissed me.

The world stopped spinning, and I became lost in his embrace. All my fears and insecurities melted away. There was just him and me and the night.

I don't know how long it lasted, but eventually I felt the need to breath and had to turn my head. The cold night air was so sweet, burning my lungs a bit as I gasped to pull it in. "Aurora," Jessie whispered, his face buried in my hair. "No matter where we go, no matter how much time we have together, you will always have my heart."

The End

Thank you for reading *Heart of the Vampire*, book two in The Vanderlind Castle series. Look for *Fate of the Vampire*, the final book in the series, to be available in the winter of 2013. If you are enjoying reading about Aurora and Jessie, please tell a few friends about The Vanderlind Castle series or post a review. Word of mouth is crucial for authors.

While you're waiting for the return of Jessie Vanderlind, please consider trying *The Urchin: Plague of Vampires* by my alter ego and good twin, Adrienne Ambrose. Here are the first few chapters so you can try before you buy.

The Urchin

By Adrianne Ambrose

Chapter 1

The sun was skimming the horizon as Nick guided his Stearman north towards New Washington. It would be dark soon. Too dark to fly. He would have to find a safe place to touch down for the night. The wind tugged persistently at an errant lock of his sandy blond hair that had escaped the confinement of his leather helmet. Annoyed, Nick shoved the curl back into place and adjusted his goggles as he scanned the landscape. He used to love to fly. Getting up in his father's old biplane was one of the true joys of his childhood. Of course, that was back when flying in an open cockpit meant there were things to look at. Now there was just mile upon mile of nothing. Over the last hour, he'd seen the hulls of a few blasted out buildings and a handful of brutally scorched trees. Sometimes he could even make out where a road must have been, but his compass was really the only thing he could rely on to guide his way north.

There was a soft thud and the Stearman wobbled, unsteadily. The plane felt off balance. Had he hit something?

Nick couldn't imagine what there was to hit in the middle of the barren wasteland, but the Stearman's stick was off somehow. It felt like the right wing of his plane was dragging something weighty. But what?

Nick saw it, far out there, hanging on the very edge of the wing. A figure? A face? "What the hell? What is that?" he blurted in alarm. When flying so close to the ground, it only takes a second of lost concentration to cause an accident and Nick spent several seconds staring at the large mass dragging off the tip of his wing. The wheels of the plane drew too dangerously close to the crumbled remains of a building and Nick clipped it. "Damn it," he yelled.

The ground came up quick and hard. "No! No! No! Shit!" The pilot narrated the crash, his teeth rattling as he tried to avoid the larger pieces of debris that blanketed the wasteland. Sizable chunks of cement, twisted pieces of rebar, random battered personal items of people who had been vaporized off the face of the planet in an instant all threw themselves in his path. He got the Stearman down, but it was limping jerkily along like a three legged dog. Suddenly, the plane lurched sharply to the right and spun out. "Whoa."

Nick knew without looking that the wheel that had clipped the building was busted. "Un-fucking-believable," he chastised himself, shaking his head. "There're three standing buildings in the whole state and I hit one of them." It hadn't been much of a building, more like a teetering ruin, but there was enough of it left to do damage to a plane with a pilot who had lost focus.

As soon as the Stearman stopped moving, Nick yanked his goggles off his face and sprang up in his seat, twisting to look at the wing. Whatever was snagged there must have been knocked off during his derailed rollercoaster landing. Nick felt a chill across the back of his neck. "Some kind of debris that got kicked up in the wind, I guess," he tried to

reassure himself. Scanning the barren wasteland surrounding him, he added, "Or maybe a mutant Big Bird."

Nick sat back down in the cockpit and tried to think of what to do next. He hadn't so much as seen a remote outpost for at least the last hour and a half. "I am so screwed," he muttered to himself. "There's nothing here."

A faint squeaking sound caught the pilot's attention. He scanned in all directions. Where was it coming from? The sound was familiar, mechanical in some way. The image of hot summer afternoons and chasing the ice cream truck popped into his brain. From out of the west, a group of teenagers, all boys, road towards him on mountain bikes that were badly in need of a little oil. In unison, they skidded to a stop several feet from the plane. Nick gawked at them as they returned his look with cool stares. There were a half a dozen of them, scruffy looking, ranging in age from thirteen to sixteen or seventeen, Nick estimated.

"Hello," he called out, trying to keep his voice low to hide his nervousness. "Uh... I had a bit of a problem."

This announcement brought little reaction from the guys. They seemed to be scrutinizing him. Unwilling to be intimidated by a pack of snot-nosed punks, Nick defiantly met their gaze. They were all dressed in snug fitting motorcycle leathers that appeared to have been stitched from mismatched pieces of material. It looked as if most of them had cannibalized bits of luggage and maybe even an old couch to construct their garments. They were also all carrying multiples of some type of tools on broad strips of leather, bandoleer style, crossing their chests. Like teenage banditos on bicycles, Nick thought with some discomfort. One of the older guys, the one with dark hair, suddenly barked, "Get down off that plane. Make it quick."

Nick pulled back slightly. That wasn't what he was expecting to hear. To make matters worse, he had just realized what the weird implements were that the boys were carrying. They were all heavily armed with sharpened

wooded stakes, what appeared to be wooden flails and several other weapons that he couldn't readily identify. Plus, they were each carrying a bow and a quiver crammed full of arrows slung over their backs.

They wanted to be tough, apparently, but Nick wasn't in the mood to be menaced by a pack of grubby teenagers. He was never in that kind of a mood. "Don't get pissy," he said, forcing his voice to come out deep and steady. "I've just had a bit of plane trouble. Fetch an adult for me. I need talk to someone about getting my wheel fixed." At twenty, he knew he probably wasn't that much older than the largest boys, but he thought it was best to proceed with the air of authority.

The boys visibly bristled, exchanging looks. The dark haired one checked the time, using an old pocket watch that was connected to one of his belt loops by an ornate chain. With his eyes on the dial he said, "The sun's almost gone. There's not much time. You'd better hurry up and get down from there."

"Listen kid, enough with the attitude. I just need to talk to your dad or someone in charge."

The boy glanced up while putting his watch back in his pocket. "Kid...?"

"Vance is in charge," an older guy with dirty blond hair snarled, jabbing his thumb in the dark haired kid's direction. "We're about all the authority you're going to find around here."

"Take it easy, Dave," Vance said in a quiet voice. "He doesn't know what's what."

A small, wiry kid with wavy hair, who looked about thirteen, was unable to stay still. He kept nervously switching his feet on the pedals of his bike and scanning the sky behind Nick. "You'd better come with us, Mister," his pubescent voice was like a reed whistling in the gloaming. "It's almost dark and they'll be coming soon."

"Martin! Control it." Vance barked, glaring fiercely at the younger boy. Martin registered a hurt look of surprise, but immediately hardened his face.

"Who's coming?" Nick asked, his mind immediately flickering back to the dark mass he had glimpsed hanging on the wing of his plane.

"Some of our night dwelling friends," Vance replied, his lips curling into a bitter smile.

Nick wasn't sure he liked the look of his new acquaintances. There was something about them, almost feral in nature. "Okay," he said after a moment's hesitation. "Thanks, but I'd better just stay with my plane."

"Suit yourself," Vance gave a callous shrug.

"But," Martin was startled, "we can't just leave him here."

"He's not part of us," Vance said, stiffly. "He can do what he wants."

While the boys turned their bikes around, preparing to leave, Nick scanned the barren landscape that spread out from all sides of the plane like the Atlantic Ocean engulfing a lonely boat. A night spent alone in this wasteland was not an inviting prospect. Neither were the boys, for that matter. Nick examined his circumstance. He had no food and no water. He was teetering on the brink of a total day hiker's nightmare scenario and he was turning away the only offer of aid he was likely to encounter. The sun was about to plunge below the horizon. With a creeping feeling of dread, Nick knew that staying with his plane would be a mistake. A very big mistake. "Now, wait a minute," he called out as the kids were about to leave. "Maybe I'd better come with you."

Vance snapped his head around and glared at the pilot. "Either you're coming or you're staying, but make up your mind quick because in another five minutes you're going to regret both decisions."

"I'll come with you," Nick decided, gingerly hoisting a canvas satchel to his shoulder and struggling out of the

cockpit.

“Hurry up.”

Vance and Dave swiftly rigged what looked like a large plastic cutting board between their bikes. It had been modified with notches cut out of both ends so that it could be snapped onto the frame of two bicycles like a toy train track. “Have a seat,” Vance told Nick, curtly gesturing towards the board. “And make it snappy.” Vance squinted towards the setting sun. “We've got to go.” When the guys started pedaling, Vance called out, “Scott, Kelly, take rear guard. Rick, alert the Urchin.”

The larger boy, the one called Rick, sped ahead of the little band. Scott and Kelly slowed their bikes to a stop. The pilot looked over his shoulder to see what they were up to. He assumed Kelly was the one with dark curly hair and the Irish complexion. Scott was probably the one with darker skin and black hair. The boys waited, scanning the skies while the others faded into the distance. Finally, keeping his voice casual, Kelly wondered, “Do you think they have enough of a lead? We should get started.”

“If you’re nervous, we can get going,” was Scott’s smug reply.

“I was just concerned for you. I know how you get when you’re away from home.”

Scott tightened his grip on his handlebars and blew air out his nose. “Don’t worry about me, Sunshine. I can wait as long as you can.”

The terrain was rough, littered with crushed refrigerators, rotting shoes and glinting shards of glass, the wreckage of a civilization that had abruptly disintegrated. Rick and Martin were nimble enough on their bikes, darting and swooping around the debris, but with the board balanced between them, Vance and Dave’s progression was significantly slowed. Martin was having trouble keeping pace with the other two. He kept pulling

ahead, apparently intent to get to wherever they were going, but then he would look over his shoulder, note the large distance between them, fall back to ride at Vance's side.

Nick clung to the board, trying to keep his balance with his satchel cradled in his lap. It wasn't easy. Looking over at Vance he estimated his age to be about sixteen or seventeen. He had a pale, but handsome face with steely blue eyes set in dark lashes. His jaw was clenched as he stood up on the pedals, using his whole body to propel the bike forward as quickly as possible. "Wwhhat aaare yooouuu kiddsss doooingg heerrreee?" Nick tried to ask as he was jounced along, but his query went ignored. On the other side of him, Dave was equally intense, his body bobbing back and forth with his effort to pedal, his hands gripping the handlebars so tightly his knuckles were white. Even though the bikes were locked together by the board, Dave surreptitiously kept glancing in Vance's direction every few seconds.

After several minutes of enduring his uncomfortable conveyance, Nick noticed something in the distance. It was a building, strangely out of place in a landscape of devastation, but large enough that, in full daylight, he would have probably seen it from his plane. The whole image was strange and discomfiting; as if he had just been transported into the heart of a Dali painting where incongruous objects have been dropped by an absentminded giant into a monochromatic desert. Someone had erected a bizarre scaffolding of wooden spikes all over the structure so that it appeared like an enormous sea urchin bristling in a tide-less wasteland. "Whhhy...?" Nick chattered, mostly to himself, realizing that no one was likely to take the time to explain the building's appearance.

Rick was waiting at the building's rusting front gate. He'd dismounted his bike and flung it on the ground to the side of the entrance. He'd taken his bow from its quiver and

had an arrow nocked and ready to fly. Martin, unable to reign in his fear any longer, sped ahead to join him. Vance and Dave skidded their bikes to a halt and Nick was propelled off his perch, only catching himself from falling with a few running steps. He peered through the bars of the gate to see that dozens of boys were crowding the front windows of the spiky building. Turning to Vance, Nick asked, "Why's this thing covered with ...?"

"Stakes?" Vance supplied. "Call the rear guard," he told Dave before giving Nick a spare glance. "It keeps our old friends from coming home to roost."

"Oh, well that explains it," Nick mumbled to himself.

Dave put two fingers to his lips and blew a loud, shrill whistle. "Should we take the new-comer inside?" he asked, lowering his hand.

"No, stick to procedure."

Dave's face tightened as he looked into the encroaching night. "Where are they? They'd better hurry."

Vance pulled out his pocket watch and flipped it open. Standing at his shoulder, Nick was able to get a good look. A window in the face of the time piece represented a.m. and p.m. with a sun and a moon that slowly rotated with each passing minute. At 7:12 p.m., the watch was just about to move forward to totally eclipse the sun and only show the moon.

Kelly and Scott were both gripping the handlebars of their bikes for all they were worth, but that was the only indication either of them was willing to concede that he might feel tense in any way. The sound of Dave's whistle piercing the air made them both sit up just a little, but besides that neither immediately reacted to it. "There's the signal. Ready to go?" Scott finally asked, his voice casual.

"If you're afraid, go ahead," Kelly replied.

Scott gestured in the direction of the Urchin with a half bow, "No, no, after you."

"No, I insist. Age before beauty," Kelly countered.

Scott kicked off and began madly pumping his bicycle's pedals, raising a small cloud of dust. He called over his shoulder back to Kelly, "Pearls before swine." After stalling for a moment, Kelly started furiously pedaling in pursuit of his friend.

Back at the Urchin, Martin was trembling. He stood as close to the gate's entrance as possible. "The others are coming. I can feel it," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Why won't they hurry?" Without looking at him, Vance reached out and put a steadying hand on Martin's shoulder.

"Here they come," Dave said with some relief.

The rear guard made their appearance in the distance, using the full weight of their bodies to crank the pedals, but still managing to zigzag dexterously around the larger fragments of rubble as they headed towards the gate. "And our buddies are right behind them," Vance added, knowing the truth more than seeing it.

"Who?" Nick asked. He could barely make out Scott and Kelly on their bikes. There didn't seem to be anyone following them.

As the sun was completely engulfed by the horizon, three enormous birds rose out of the darkness, flying through the air at an amazing speed. It was hard for the pilot to tell in the darkness, but they were each a good five or six feet in length and appeared to be pursuing the boys.

"Fuck. It's Old Gym," Dave muttered, half under his breath.

Nick could feel Rick and Martin shifting on the ground behind him in agitation. "Asshole," he heard Rick utter.

Vance fixed Nick with a steely glare. "We shouldn't have waited for you."

"What are those things?" the pilot asked, too mesmerized to take offense at Vance's words. "Birds?" No one answered him. They were intent on the efforts of the rear guard.

The creatures looked so peculiar. Not like birds at all. They didn't flap their wings, or even appear to have wings, for that matter. An idea occurred to the pilot. "Men?" he wondered aloud. "Are those flying things men? How are they...?" he couldn't even think of the words to finish his sentence. "What are they doing?"

The rear guard was getting closer, but so were the flying creatures. "Should we go inside?" Dave asked, his voice carried an edge like a scalpel.

"No," Vance was firm. "We stand our ground until we can all go inside." Turning, he thrust something into Nick's hands. "Here, you might want this."

Nick looked down at the sharpened wooden spike that had been pressed upon him. "What? Why?"

"Hurry!" Martin shrieked at the rear guard. Even though they were pedaling with all their might, their progress felt painstakingly slow. All of the scouting party had their bows nocked and ready for action.

Finally Scott and Kelly were nearing the gate, but their pursuers were almost upon them. "Get ready to close," Vance shouted to the numerous faces watching from the windows.

Nick could feel the waves of tension radiating off the guys. "What the fuck are those things?" he demanded in frustration.

The largest of the three creatures swooped out of the sky and snatched a shrieking Scott right off of his bicycle.

"Vampires!" Vance shouted.

Chapter 2

Vance fired two arrows into the air in rapid succession causing the vampire to execute a feat of aerial acrobatics to avoid being hit. Scott contorted his body and wrenched himself free.

The creature looked on as his prey plummeted to the earth. Nick could have sworn he saw the vampire mouth the word, "Shit."

Scott hit the ground and rolled. Kelly arrived at the gate and was instantly off his bike and ready for action. "Kelly. Rick. Retrieve Scott," Vance ordered. "Dave. Martin. Give cover."

As the two boys darted forward, each grabbing one of Scott's arms and dragging him towards the gate, Vance, Dave, and Martin created a hailstorm of arrows to keep the vampires at bay. "Shut down. Now!" Vance shouted, without breaking his steady firing. Every window in the building immediately slammed closed, all enforced with heavily spiked shutters. There were two smaller vampires that hesitated out of range of the wooden projectiles, but the big one that had accosted Scott dove towards them without wavering. Vance fired off another accurate round of arrows,

which the vampire deftly eluded by only twitching his body slightly to one side or the other.

"What the hell...?" Nick gulped, his throat dry.

"Get out of here, Gym, unless you want to get staked," Vance roared. Another arrow was instantly nocked in his bow.

Old Gym fell back slightly and hovered at a distance, surveying them. "What are you trying to pull, Vance?" the vampire bellowed.

"Nothing," the Vance growled. "Now, get out." He drew the arrow in his bow back even further, but it didn't appear to dissuade the vampire.

"You think that was smart?" The vampire hovered in the air with great ease as if he'd been flying since birth. "Saving some damn pilot that doesn't even know how to fly a plane?"

"Hey," Nick was about to protest, but then he realized the creature was right.

A small wind blew Vance's dark hair in his eyes, but he didn't so much as blink. "You have no authority here anymore."

"Saving pilots," the vampire groused half to himself. "That's the kind of stupidity that's going to get you killed."

All three vampires laughed hysterically as if this was high humor. Without warning they abruptly made a break for the humans, rapidly propelling themselves through the air. Their advance was instantly repelled by a flight of arrows.

The small group on the ground staged a fighting retreat through the front gate. They backed towards the open door of the building, Nick moving with them. Rags woven into a heavy, intricate net had been strung between the gate and the building, making it more difficult for the vampires to get through, but only slightly impeding the trajectory of the arrows.

As soon as the little band stumbled into the front hall, two boys stationed on sentry duty inside the building

instantly slammed the massive front door shut. They shot several metal bolts into place and then secured the whole thing with a metal crossbar that emitted a shriek like an old jail cell door being dragged closed. Safe inside, Rick unceremoniously released Scott. He would have smacked the stone floor hard, if Kelly hadn't used his body to cushion his fall. "Dude, are you okay? I thought you were totally dead," Kelly said as he roughly propped Scott's head on his knee.

"For a minute, there, I thought I was dead, too," Scott croaked.

Vance interrupted the quiet tête-à-tête by commanding, "Kelly, stick to procedure. Dave, check Scott for bites."

Dave was already stepping forward with Rick right behind him. "It's okay. I'm not bit," Scott said, struggling to get to his feet.

"You know the rules," Dave closed in. "Let's go."

Dave and Rick started roughly stripping Scott of his leathers. "Easy guys. I'm not bit." Scott squawked in protest.

With the beating of his heart finally slowing in his chest, Nick became more aware of his surroundings. His eyes adjusted and he was able to look around the dimly lit front hall. It was cavernous with tall, narrow peaked windows that faced the front of the building, but were now heavily shuttered with reinforced wood. The remnants of a few torn curtains hung askew on broken curtain rods. An oil painting of a man on a Napoleon style rearing horse hung over the blocked fireplace, its canvas only slightly torn. There were rows upon rows of framed photographs, almost all of which were missing their glass, showing boys and young men lined up in military fashion, wearing matching gray uniforms. Crowded around him in the hall was a large group of lean and disheveled looking boys, most of whom were watching Scott get worked over. "What in the hell is all this?" the pilot murmured.

"I'm not bit," Scott insisted, indignant. His protests echoed off the tall ceiling but doing little to dissuade the others from relieving him of all his clothes.

"He's clean," Dave announced, letting Scott drop to the ground with a dull thunk.

"Told you," Scott said, sullenly, as he hiked up the pants of his leather suit.

"What happened to you guys out there?" Vance demanded. "Why were you so far back?"

"We..." Kelly couldn't think of a plausible excuse. "We screwed up." He confessed, hanging his head in shame.

Whirling around, Vance confronted Nick. "Saving you almost cost us a man."

"I'm sorry," the pilot stammered. "I had no idea. I mean, vampires, right? How was I supposed to know? It just," Nick floundered for words. "It just doesn't make any sense."

"Next time you delay us, we'll leave you," Vance snarled.

Martin crept up next to Vance and whispered in his ear, causing the older boy's eyes to shift back in Nick's direction. "You're right," he said. Then, to Nick, "I'm afraid we're going to have to check you for bites."

Nick stiffened. "Forget it, kid. No one's checking me for anything."

Vance was not dissuaded. "Listen, we have procedures to follow. No one gets inside unless we're sure they're not going to vamp."

"What? Don't be ridiculous."

Vance signaled to Dave with a thrust of his chin. "Would you please check our guest?"

Dave, Kelly, and Rick stepped towards Nick. "You have three choices," Dave said in a matter-of-fact tone. "You can strip. We can strip you. Or you can go outside."

Nick scanned the faces surrounding him. They were deadly serious. "Okay, fine," he capitulated setting his

satchel gently on the stone floor. "If it'll make you guys feel better." He quickly shrugged out of his bomber jacket, yanked off his button down and t-shirt, then unbuckled his jeans and dropped them around his ankles, not bothering to remove his laced up boots. "Satisfied?" he asked, unwilling to be embarrassed.

Dave gestured towards his boxer shorts. "Drop 'em."

Nick thought about protesting, but he knew it would do no good. He had the vague recollection of some of his old buddies talking about pledge week at various fraternity houses. The pilot shed his boxer shorts down to his ankles.

Vance barely looked in Nick's direction. Instead, he half turned to question Dave. "Who's first watch tonight?"

"Owen's squad."

"Tell him to be on high alert. Something tells me we're not done for the night."

Dave jerked his head towards Nick, who had figured he'd been on display long enough and was hastily yanking up his boxers. "What do we do with him?"

Vance shrugged "Let him get dressed."

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